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King Alfred's jewel.



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KING ALFRED'S JEWEL

*“The same God, Who meteth all things . . .
Knits together in a love most fond
Unending wedlock.”*

—POEMS OF KING ALFRED THE GREAT
(Jubilee Edition), p. 198.



FRED MELLER THE WAY WE CAN

KING ALFRED'S : : JEWEL : :

BY

KATRINA TRASK

AUTHOR OF

MORS ET VICTORIA
NIGHT AND MORNING

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INTRODUCTION

“Seeing that so many uncritical statements on the subject of King Alfred are abroad, it is all the more imperative that we begin our work with a critical survey of the materials at our disposal. We shall find them in many respects disappointingly scanty and incomplete.

“. . . The first place in our list of authorities for the life of Alfred must be given to his own literary works. It is true that the evidence they furnish is mostly indirect, but it is for that very reason all the more secure.”

—CHARLES PLUMMER, M.A., *The Life and Times of Alfred the Great.*

HE who would find King Alfred through the mist of the centuries knows the force, the truth of these words.

One searches the Saxon Chronicles ; they are as bare as bones. One searches the pages of Asser, and they contain a heavy coat, of divers threads monk-woven, that hides the Man. One turns to Alfred's transla-

tions of Boethius, Orosius, Bede, St. Gregory's "Pastoral Care," and "The Blossom Gatherings" from St. Augustine, and there one meets the living Alfred, throbbing with eternal life—alive in every personal word interwoven between the lines of the text he translated that he might pass on to his people the "bloom" which he had gathered.

With simple directness "Alfred The-Truth-Teller" reveals himself. First, by the varying subjects which he chooses to translate: History, Travel, Philosophy, Law, Ecclesiastical Literature and Pagan Story, the Church's Legends, and the Ballad of the simple folk; then, by the manner of his translation; but, most of all, in his own words which shine out from the text. One apprehends the motive-springs that moved him; one feels the concentration and the many-sidedness, the ambition and the aspiration of this sovereign spirit.

Scholar, Statesman, Poet, Author, Law-giver, Churchman—but in all and through all, a Man. Not a visionary Saint, not a sexless Monk, but a Man of natural body and of quickening spirit met together ; a Man of three-fold nature commingled, as Alfred himself portrayed a Man in these words :—

“I said that the soul was three-fold because philosophers affirm that it hath three natures. One of these natures is subject to desire ; the second, subject to passion ; and the third, that it is rational. . . . Reason must control both desire and passion, for it is a special virtue of the soul. . . .

“Thou, O Lord, bringest together heavenly souls and earthly bodies, and minglest them in this world.”

KING ALFRED'S JEWEL

A

CHARACTERS

ALFRED . . . *King of England.*
CORNEWULF . . . *Cup-bearer to the King.*
MONFICHET . . . *The King's Fool.*
CEDRIC . . . *A Thane.*
GURTH . . . *A Neat-herd.*
GUNERUNG . . . *A Dane.*

AN EALDORMAN.

THE BISHOP.

ELSWITHA . . . *Wife of King Alfred.*
ELFREDA . . . *Daughter of Gurth the Neat-herd.*
DRIDDA . . . *Wife of Gurth and Mother to Elfreda.*
NUMANERA . . . *First Maiden to the Queen.*

Courtiers, Thanes, Monks, Ladies of the Court, Saxon soldiers, etc.

The Scene is laid in England in the years 878 and 879 A.D.

KING ALFRED'S JEWEL

ACT I

SCENE I

The Forest of Selwood

The day after the Battle of Chippenham, where the English had been surprised in their winter quarters by the Danes. The victory was decisive for the Danes. KING ALFRED has disappeared and the Saxon host is scattered.
A lonely part of the forest, silent with the silence of mid-winter. The bare oak-trees and beech-trees are interspersed with many evergreens. To the right, the forest is comparatively open; a path leads to the centre, where the ground rises and the trees stand farther apart. To the left, it is very dense; in the foreground, closely growing shrubs of ever-

green form a thicket. For a few moments nothing can be seen but the silent forest.

ALFRED, King of England, comes from the right and walks to the open. He is disguised; he wears the rough dress and cap of the Saxon peasant; he takes off the cap, which had been pulled far down over his face, and lifts his head eagerly—with a boyish freedom of movement suggestive of indomitable life; he draws a long deep breath, and looks about him at the forest and at the sunset sky, as though abandoning himself to the refreshment of nature.

ALFRED. Through glooms of forest and through open glade,

Across the wind-swept, winter-shrouded marsh,

I hurried onward to this secret place.

Here, I may bide in safety for the night.

I would that I had brought my harp with me !

The wild wind chanting in the evergreens,

The myriad branches of the naked oaks—
Majestic tracery against the sky—
The sunset colours of the glowing West,
Stir me to music, songs within me well ;
O that I had my harp ! Then would I sing !

[A voice comes from the thicket.]

ELFREDA. Are you a minstrel, sir ? I
pray you, sing

Without a harp—what harp hath singing-
bird ?

ALFRED (*looking quickly to the left and to the right*). Who speaks ? Whence comes
that voice ?

*[A light laugh comes from the thicket,
and again the voice.]*

ELFREDA. Deep in the tangle of this greenery
I tryst with fairies—and you broke the spell !
I will not chide you, for you did not know.

*[A maiden steps out from the thicket;
she is young and very fair. She*

*is dressed in the simple frock worn
by the Saxon peasants ; it is home-
spun like theirs, but, unlike theirs,
the colour is white.*

ALFRED (*aside*). As innocent as moonlight
is her face,
And in her eyes sits purity enthroned.

[*Aloud.*

Friend of the fairies, lovely forest-child,
What is your name ?

ELFREDA. Elfreda. Tell me yours.

ALFRED. I am a wanderer. I have no
name.

ELFREDA. No name, poor wanderer ? And
have you no home ?

ALFRED. My home is buried in a mist of
woe.

ELFREDA. Come home with me—our door
is open wide,

Huts have no latches—you are welcome there.

My father is the neat-herd—Gurth. In
speech,

Perchance, he may be rough, but not in deed.
My mother is most kind.

ALFRED. Hast thou no fear, Elfreda?

Evil men

May wander in the forest—ruthless Danes.

ELFREDA. God walks here, also ; He is
stronger far

Than any man.

ALFRED (*aside*). O blessed innocence !
I will confide in her ; true is her heart
As white-robed Truth.

(*Aloud.*) Elfreda, I would fain
Rest close awhile, from every one concealed,
My thoughts for company. I may not seek
Thy sheltering roof; no man may know of me;
I trust thy lips to guard my hiding-place.

ELFREDA. I will not tell it—even to the
birds !

And I will share with you my secret Bower.

[*Pointing to the thicket.*

Within its round secure you may sleep safe ;
But you must bend your head—you are so
tall !—

When you would enter underneath the bough.
There you will find my treasury—a wing
As white as hawthorn from a bird that flew
Inland from the great waters of the sea ;
A sunrise-tinted shell ; a lonely nest ;
A truest fairy stone, o'erlaid with moss,
Whereon the fairies danced in merriment,
When the dew fell at moonlight in the wood—
Touch not the stone lest you should break
the charm !

Will you be gone to-morrow, when I come ?

ALFRED (*smiling*). Not if you come to-mor-
row, ere I go.

ELFREDA. I rise at crow of cock and cross
the wood

To seek this open where I find the sky.
I love to watch the Sun come from his bed
Of rosy dawn-clouds in the joyous East,
And put his glistering armour on. Each morn
I watch and watch the pallid sky and fear
That he will never come again ; but yet,
He rises every happy day anew.
The Mass-Priest said I should be at my
prayers—
But must one speak to pray ? Methinks I
pray
Without an Ave when I see the Sun !
Look—Minstrel—at the shadows, where they
creep
Beneath the trees like ghosts in winding-
sheets !
My Mother will be calling—I must go.

[*ELFREDA runs away, waving her hand.*

*ALFRED stands silent until she is
out of sight ; then he speaks.*

ALFRED. After the hurtling hiss, the desperate din
Of battle-hours—the onward-moving rush—
The constant clangor of relentless steel ;
After long wandering, pursued, hard-pressed—
This calm-fraught silentness is kind to me.
My heart is heavy-laden and disquieted,
But in this refuge, rounded close with green,
I may contemplate the most dire event
Of our dark yesterday.

My valiant host
Is scattered ; a triumphant enemy
Laughs in derision at our overthrow.
Elswitha and my son at Athelney,
Encompassed by the Danes, in danger wait.
Black-girdled is the morrow, sable-clad—
O God of Light ! Light Thou my sombre
path.
Thy Standard on this Island I must place,
That every sea-king, jarl and common thrall,

In the great heathen army, may know Thee,
And turn from pagan worship to Thy feet.
I cannot slink away to live at Rome
In idle tutelage, as Burgred lived ;
There *is* a way—a door to victory ;
It is my quest to find it !

Lo ! A star !

There, in the welkin, gleams the Evening Star ;
It comes with sudden shining prophecy
Into the shadow of this twilight dim ;
Full soon the vasty spaces of the sky
Will glow with all the marshalled host of
heaven.

Thus, through the darkness, comes a sign to
me.

I take the augury. Hope spreads her wings.
I will hold counsel with the mighty stars ;
And then, to-morrow, on to Athelney
To gather forces for a new campaign ;
Unconquerable England *shall* prevail !

My arm once more is strong for victory
Despite defeat, which doth but whet my
pride.

I—Alfred—am the crowned, anointed King ;
The God of Splendour is my Sovereign
Lord ;

I will—

Jesu, have mercy !

My eyes are sightless — and my heart is
faint—

[ALFRED *sways and almost falls, but saves himself ; leaning against a tree, he passes his hand over his eyes, then to his forehead, where he holds it as he continues speaking.*

God ! have I fought and held grim death at
bay

To meet the silent Angel unaware
Here, in the lonely forest ? Is this death ?
We are but as the lilies of the field.

In the same moment that our spirit soars
And every power arises strong for flight
We are cut down—

Ah! I remember now!

I have not tasted food since I went forth
To battle—I forgot to eat. Must man's
Immortal spirit wait on mortal needs—
High purpose on corruption? Enterprise
On hunger? Poor mortality to be
Thus hedged about with circumstance of
flesh,
And choked with dust and ashes!—Ah—I
faint—

Our blessed Lord Himself was likewise bound
In His humanity—Upon the Cross
He suffered thirst—I hunger—

[ALFRED falls at the foot of the tree
and swoons.

SCENE II

*The following morning; sunrise. The Scene
is the same as before*

KING ALFRED is lying unconscious at the foot of the tree. ELFREDA is kneeling beside him; she bathes his head with water from a small jug. On the ground beside her there is also another jug and a small loaf of bread; she looks anxiously at ALFRED; suddenly he opens his eyes.

ALFRED (*faintly*). Elswitha—Edward—am I home?

ELFREDA. O no,

Poor Minstrel! You are here, in forest hid. Speak not but drink. Now—take and eat this bread.

[ELFREDA holds the jug to ALFRED'S lips; he takes a deep draught of milk. She then gives him the

*bread, which he eats ravenously ;
he raises himself and, leaning upon
his arm, looks into ELFREDA'S
face ; the colour comes back to
his cheeks.*

ALFRED. Elfreda !

ELFREDA. Ah !—You know me !

I am glad.

Methought that you were dead, when first I
came ;

You lay so still, and looked as coldly white
As my sweet sister looked when in the
ground

We laid her—Rest her soul !—Then to the
burn

I went for water, to the hut for food ;
I feared that you were dead ; but as I bathed
Your face I prayed that God would let you
live,

That you would open those fast-closèd eyes—

And then you opened them—He heard my
prayer.

ALFRED. How knew you that I was an
hungered, child ?

ELFREDA. I know not how I knew it—but
I knew ;

Within mine ears I seemed to hear a voice,
“ Give him to eat, Elfreda.” So I ran,
And brought my morning portion forth to
you.

ALFRED. In very truth you are a woman,
child ;

A woman's heart with tender surety knows
When to pour forth the spikenard of her
care.

Give me to drink again—

[ALFRED takes another long draught.

And let me eat ;

We cannot live without our daily bread
Whatever our philosophy. Sweet maid,

No fatted calf, no spicèd honey-mead,
 E'er pleased my fancy as this forest feast ;
 Come, share thine own—eat thou, and drink
 with me.

[ALFRED *breaks the bread, giving some to ELFREDA, and passes the milk to her; he rises.*

I am remade, restrengthened by thy grace.
 The Father of all Angels bless thee, child.
 Thy service I will not forget.

ELFREDA. And I
 Will not forget you, for your face is like
 Two things I love—prayers and a festal-day.
 ALFRED (*aside*). My two-fold nature doth
 the child divine.

(*Aloud.*) A festal-day and prayer ?

ELFREDA. I think of both.
 When I behold your face I seem to kneel
 In church where Saints are singing—then
 to be

Laughing and running in the wild green wood.

ALFRED (*laying his hand on her head*). Farewell !

[ELFREDA goes away, waving her hand, and singing a melody without words.

ALFRED. Life ! And God's world ! New-girt with threefold strength,

Clothed with new garments of the risen morn,
Give me but opportunity !

Who comes ?

Footsteps—far off—I know the soldier-tread—

[ALFRED starts, and listens as steps are heard coming through the forest ; he goes over to the thicket at the left ; he turns up the collar of his doublet and pulls the cap down over his eyes so that his face is almost entirely hidden. From the opposite side, CEDRIC enters with four Saxon soldiers.

If they be Danes, I seek Elfreda's Bower ;
If they be Saxons—yea, 'tis Saxon men,
And Cedric with them ! Opportunity
Is here. I will not yet declare myself ;
I will their temper try and hear their
words.

CEDRIC. By God in Heaven ! We yet
shall drive the Danes
Into the sea, that bore them to our shores.

[He peers through the trees.]

Look ! Through the trees ! A soldier in dis-
guise !

FIRST SOL. How know you he is not a
common churl ?

CEDRIC. A soldier knows another soldier's
form,

His step, his movements, though he be dis-
guised.

Ho—there ! Stand still ! Who are you ?
Answer me.

ALFRED (*in an assumed voice*). Good morrow, sir.

CEDRIC. *Good* morrow? Nay, not good; It is a bad To-day when Saxon men, Yea, Saxon soldiers — for I know your stamp! —

Hide in the woods for cowardice. O shame! That you, a soldier, should be sneaking here,

When England needs each unit to increase The sum of her resistance.

ALFRED. I have heard
The King doth also in close-hiding lurk;
He, it is said, ingloriously ran
From the lost field and hid himself so deep
That he is lost, e'en to his followers,

ALL. Silence!

FIRST SOL. Dare not to speak of our
liege lord
In accents so familiar!

CEDRIC. By the Cross !

I will avenge the inference. The King
Skulks not in hiding from a low-born fear ;
Brave as St. Michael fought he on the field ;
I saw five Danes beset him at one time ;
He clove his freedom through the gory way
His royal sword hacked for him.

At the last,—

But not until the last, when from our ranks
Each peradventure had been forced to flight—
When driven from their vantage-ground our
host

Ran down the slope, confessing their defeat,
King Alfred vanished—no man knoweth
where.

All night we sought him, but we found him not.

Bitter the fate for us—though he is wise.

Our valiant King holds in his hand our cause,
And in his person holds our liberty ;

He *is* incarnate England! Well he knows,
If he were prisoner, despair would fall
On every Saxon like a blighting frost.
Somewhere, he waits—not *hiding* but well
hid—

Weaving upon the loom of his great mind
A new emprise to save us. We are his,
And trust him seen or hiding—in the fight
Or in the forest, watching for his hour.
The Saxon host has rallied and desire him,
The King, the heart, the leader of the host.
It is a wrath-arousing chance to find
A soldier hidden in a churl's disguise,
Assailing lightly his belovèd name.

ALFRED. I have but said he hides, as I am
hidden.

CEDRIC. And I have said I would avenge
that word!

Who art thou, coward, that the King's great
name,

The King's great deeds, and thine, should be
compared ?

Were you a churl, I should dispatch your
clay

To rot upon the marshes ; but no churl—
I take you for a soldier, Alfred's man.

ALFRED (*smiling*). I am a soldier, as you
have divined,

But—Alfred's man ?—That were a question
fit

For school and scholars.

CEDRIC (*handing ALFRED a sword*). Cease
your impudence !

It passes bearing. Take this heathen sword—
I captured it from an expiring Dane—
Defend yourself and fight ! I call all these
In testimony that I fight with you
To prove the King hides not from cowardice.

ALFRED (*aside, examining the sword*). Get
thee behind me, Satan ; tempt me not

To lively pastime in this grave event !
What mischievous delight, what stirring cheer,
With this stout-hearted fellow to cross
swords !

But unto what avail ? I cannot spare
A single drop of his red blood—not one.

(Aloud.) I may not fight, sir, for I hold
my life,

Yea, even my well-being, in high trust.

CEDRIC (*rushing on ALFRED*). I care not,
coward, for your trust ! Come on !

ALFRED (*lifting his cap and speaking in his
natural voice*). Cedric !

CEDRIC (*with much emotion, kneeling*).. My
liege !

ALL (*kneeling*). The King—the King—Thank
God !

ALFRED. Rise, Cedric—rise, my men. You
read aright

Your master's mind and, by the grace of God,

He hath read yours, and knows this doughty
band.

After the vigil of the long black night
'Tis daybreak to my heart to see, again,
Your loyal faces. I had mood to test
The mettle of my soldiers. It is done ;
I see enough in you, my gentlemen ;
With such a handful we could hold the bridge
Of hope that spans the chasm of despair.
A valiant remnant hath more potency
Than many an host less valiant.
Imprisoned England calls us to unloose
The pagan bonds that bind her ; let us go
Empanoplied in faith to set her free.
Cedric—a purpose rises and unrolls.
Come, my brave soldiers ; Athelney is near ;
There we will gather those who seek for us
And plan, ere spring, a new and swift surprise
For Guthrum and the Danes, the while they
till

Our English soil and stalk among our oaks.
When an invading army in a land
Of bounty swells with victory secure
Then is the time to strike another blow,
Despoiling them while they are at their spoils.
Not as before will we give battle next.
Wisdom persuades me honest strategy
May oft be truest bravery in war.
When Regulus the Roman—mightiest man
Of all the Romans—in Bragada slew
The Serpent, he at first essayed to shoot
Straightforward arrows at the giant Worm,
But from the gloss-smooth scales they slipped
away
As water trickles from a shining leaf.
Then he commanded the balista turned
To hurl the stones obliquely at the Thing
Sidewise to strike between the lapping scales ;
Forthwith the creeping creature was o'er-
come.

So will we by some stratagem observe
The vulnerable portion of our foe
Between the scales that archers failed to find.
Ay, Cedric, I conceive a new campaign.
We will obliquely strike—and slay the Worm !

SCENE III

Four months later; the month of May. The Hall of the rude house at Athelney, where KING ALFRED and his faithful followers have been in hiding from the Danes during the winter.

A long Hall with a door at the left and one at the right; it is barely furnished with rude seats and low benches covered with fur-skins. NUMANERA, handmaiden to the QUEEN, and other maidens, are sitting around a frame, embroidering, and singing as they work. Through the windows may be seen the lingering glow of sunset and the birds flying to their nests; the song of the

birds may be heard above the song of the MAIDENS, and afterward, from time to time, until the light fades.

THE MAIDENS (*singing*).

Weave, weave, weave the thread ;
Weave the strands of ruby-red,
Gold and silver, dark and light,
Azure-blue and fleecy white ;
Yellow strands to match the sun ;
Rose of rose—the day's begun,
Grey of grey—the day is done ;
It is a goodly sight to see
Maidens weaving broidery.

Weave, weave, weave the thread.
Are our lovers lying dead
'Mid the battle's clash and din ?
Thus we weave the question in.
Happy smiles for sunny bowers,
Heart-beats for remembered hours,

Terror black that grimly lowers,
Tears and fears for what may be,
Weave we in the broidery.

NUMANERA. O neither smiles nor questions,
nor hot tears,
In these dull days ; the thread is endless grey.
How long must we be imprisoned on this Isle ?
Rather I would by Danes be done to death !

FIRST MAID. Your courage is no courage ;
well you know
That every Dane would rescue you from
death.

My lack of beauty finds a refuge here.

SECOND MAID. To quick impatience beauty
kindles fire.

THIRD MAID. Not with the Queen—her
beauty asks no more
Than to shine fair upon this lonely Isle
Like Altar-candle in a sombre church.

NUMANERA. She hath her husband—she is
well content ;

What chance have we of husbands ?

SECOND MAID. Cedric is here—

NUMANERA. Bah ! Cedric is the shadow of
the King ;

I want a king—

SECOND MAID. Ha ! Hear the girl !—

She says

I want a king as she might say I want
A ribbon.

NUMANERA. Think you I meant a thronèd
king ?

A king in spirit will suffice for me.

SECOND MAID (*looking archly at NUMANERA*).
When comes Sir Helmwulf hither ?

NUMANERA (*tossing her head*). Ask yonder
stupid birds that make the air
All-hideous with harsh discordant notes ;
I would that I could wring their little necks—

They fret my nerves like broken strings !

He comes not—that is why.

NUMANERA. I hate the men

Upon this hateful Island ! Four long months
We are imprisoned since the King returned.

When is the trysting-day?

SECOND MAID. When the moon changes.

NUMANERA. O—too long to wait!

Give me fierce war, great battles and events—

THIRD MAID. O—too soon!—too soon!—

NUMANERA. Ha! Ha! Your white cheek

tells a tale ! And see—

The red confirms it—Hark ! The Queen !

FIRST MAID. Our Lady Beautiful!

NUMANERA (*aside, impatiently*). And I must bow
My Roman pride to her—Must sing the song
Of beauty—beauty, to her willing ear !

Are snow-white flesh and golden tresses fair ?

In Rome, the beauty lies in darker tints—

QUEEN ELSWITHA *enters.* *The MAIDENS rise.*

The QUEEN smiles graciously.

ELSWITHA. The sunset light hath faded
from the sky,

The orbèd moon rides in her silver car
And heralds evening. Put the broidery-
frame,

The many-coloured silks, away, my girls.

The wood breathes now deep quiet, and the
wind

All blossom-fragrant wooes the whispering
trees.

Go, sit beneath the moon and dream of love.

[*The MAIDENS put away the frame,*
and go out by the door at the left.

ELSWITHA. The spring-time wanes ; the
summer comes apace ;

The dreaded hour when from my lord I
part

Looms like Fate's portal ever to my sight.
 O God ! Why didst Thou give a woman's
 heart
 Free wings 'of flight, and yet tie fast her feet ?
 Swift will my spirit fly with my dear lord,
 When he goes forth ; but here, at Athelney,
 I, being woman, must abide content.
 My Alfred gone—these woods are desolate,
 This Island is a dreary Isle of death ;—
 But I will close mine eyes, and look not down
 The waiting morrows ;—I will drink the joy,
 Without foreboding, of the days that are.

*[From without comes the sound of an
 harp. ELSWITHA starts, clasps
 her hands, listening intently.]*

ALFRED (*singing*).

Lean from thy window, my darling delight,
 And rival the moon with thy face ;
 I watch for thee here, in the love-laden night,
 I wait for a word of thy grace.

ELSWITHA. Our bridal song !

ALFRED (*singing*).

Lean from thy window, my darling desire,
The Love-god keeps watch, here, with
me,
The fair-shining god, with his wings of white
fire,
O come—we are calling to thee !

[ELSWITHA *opens the door to the left.*

The moonlight floods the room.

ALFRED and ELSWITHA *meet*
on the threshold.

ALFRED (*embracing her*). Elswitha, didst
thou know the song ?

ELSWITHA. I knew

It as I know the beat of mine own heart.

O happy days of wooing, when you sang
Beneath my Mercian window !

[ELSWITHA takes the harp and hangs it upon the wall; she leads ALFRED to a low, fur-covered seat; he sits and she kneels beside him, leaning against him.

ALFRED. 'Tis May-time, Love—four months
have passed away

Since that dark night when I to thee returned.
I thought to come a conqueror, to lead
My lady forth in majesty of state
To reign o'er England ; but, instead, I came
A fugitive, in dire defeat, to make
More fast the fastness of this Athelney,
To hide her beauty deeper in the wood,
And doom her to this melancholy marsh.

ELSWITHA. O like a hero thou didst come,
my king,
Undaunted by adversity, untouched

By dire defeat. Fairer than laurel-leaves
The aureole that circled your proud head,
Brighter than victory the steadfast hope
That shone a beacon in that midnight dark.

ALFRED. Elswitha, thou art consort for a
king ;

Thou dost not judge by outward shows nor
set

The music of thyself to circumstance.

Belovèd—when I sang our bridal song
At moonrise, in sweet memory, to-night,
Upon my harp-strings trembled a farewell.

ELSWITHA. Ah !—Nay. Not yet farewell
—not yet farewell !

ALFRED. The hour has come, Elswitha, I
must go.

ELSWITHA (*turning pale, starting to her feet*).

Go ? There are many days to pass before
The appointed tryst—I count them, one by
one,

As miser counts his gold—one sunrise more,
Another moonrise, yet another dawn—

ALFRED. To-night, Elswitha, I leave Athelney.

ELSWITHA (*with a forced quiet*). The tryst hath then been hastened ?

[ALFRED takes ELSWITHA'S hand and draws her down upon the seat by his side.

ALFRED. Elswitha, dearest partner of my thought,

Thou hast approved our enterprise to strike
The Danes in their security. If we
But knew their secrets and their crafty plans
The victory were ours ! They think the King
Is conquered or, perchance, that he is dead.
What if a minstrel strolls within their camp
And sings them to forgetfulness of war,
Counting, meanwhile, their numbers, hearing
words

Of marches planned, and secret purposes !

ELSWITHA. A Saxon minstrel in a Danish
camp ?—

And who—my lord ?

ALFRED. The Saxon Alfred.

ELSWITHA (*in a voice of terror*). Oh !—

ALFRED. Fear not, Elswitha, Alfred hath
no fear.

ELSWITHA. The peerless King knows not
the word of fear ;

It is a stranger to his dauntless soul.

ALFRED. And thou, Elswitha, art King
Alfred's wife.

ELSWITHA. Each bow-string hath its limit
—this is more

Than woman's heart can bear. Alfred!—to stand
Unarmed — alone — amongst the savage
Danes !—

'Tis madness !

Must this life incomparable,

England's one hope, be put in jeopardy
Of certain death, irrevocable doom ?
As well might you essay the lion's cave
And sing to charm the hungry beasts of prey.

[ALFRED *embraces ELSWITHA but does not answer.*

ELSWITHA. Are my words naught to thee ?

ALFRED. More than the words
Of any human speech, if I might hear,
But I my purpose may not alter now.
Hope leads the host again ; each valiant arm,
That dropped despondent, is new-mailed with
strength.

We sat in council and it was agreed
It were in vain vainly to meet the foe ;
Bold fighting in the valley, on the hills,
Swords, and the speed of arrows, are as
naught

With ignorance behind them ; if we knew
The strength, the purpose and the quality,

The veritable number of our foe,
Then would each English sword smite to an
end,
Each arrow speed unto accomplishment.

ELSWITHA. Send some brave Saxon soldier
who can sing.

ALFRED. I send no man where I have fear
to go.

ELSWITHA. Go not alone, my lord—go not
alone—

ALFRED. I do not go alone—I have my
harp ;

I will be Orpheus and allure the Danes
To let me pass. If I but sing of thee,
My beautiful Elswitha, I am safe.

ELSWITHA (*in a low voice, leaning her head
lightly upon his arm*). Alfred, my husband,
I am sore afraid.

ALFRED. Be not afraid—no minstrel ever
sang

Who seemed more minstrel than thy lord will
seem ;

My garments are a minstrel's—and my face.
Had I no motive for the deed, 'twould be
A blithe adventure, fraught with merriment.
I will, with lusty voice, sing Saxon songs ;
I will, with lusty arm, play Saxon games ;
And I will throw a Saxon lance to win
A prize for thee, my lady. As I play
I will record their weakness and their strength
Upon the tablets of my memory—
Their numbers, purposes, and planned cam-
paign.

ELSWITHA (*putting her arms around ALFRED*).

I would mine arms were prison-bands
to hold

My lord at Athelney !

ALFRED. If he might stay
'Twould need no prison-bands to keep him
here.

I could forget my quest in thy warm hair,
Lost in its radiant meshes ; I could drink
Forgetfulness of kingship in thine eyes
Where living love communes with memory,
Bask in thy smile whilst England called to me,—
But, if I did not go, should I be then
The man thy heart desires ?—A woman loves
The man who does the deed.

ELSWITHA. Wise Alfred, learned in musty
parchment rolls,
Thou thinkest, when thy wisdom can suffice
To master many deep philosophies,
That it is naught to know a woman's heart ;
Believe me, sir, it is a harder task.

ALFRED (*taking Elswitha's face between his hands*). Look in mine eyes, Elswitha—
do I know ?

ELSWITHA. Ah—my Love—

[ELSWITHA *leans upon Alfred's arm*
and looks up into his face.

Alfred, rememberest thou the garden-bower
New-made to mark our bridal-night ?

ALFRED. The bride
Within the bower I do remember well ;
She was as fair as the rose-tinted dawn
Which led to fairer beauty of the day.

ELSWITHA. It was a bower of glowing
roses red—

ALFRED. It held a rose more glowing than
the bower—

ELSWITHA. O days of joyance, circled by
your grace !

There, oftentimes my learned lord would
seek,
From liquid tongues of countries o'er the sea,
Some story to beguile me, turning it
With readiness to our familiar tongue
To meet my unschooled ignorance. One tale
There was of valiant Hector and his wife—
It made me weep,—is it not passing strange ?

A Greek, so long ago, could say the word
My English heart would say to you to-day.

ALFRED. Words from the heart speak ever
to the heart ;

Love knows no yesterdays.

ELSWITHA. Alfred, thou art to me as
Hector was ;

Thou art my husband and my father, too,
My mother and my nurse ; but thou art
more—

More e'en than Hector to Andromache—
Thou art my King and my High Priest of
God.

And now thou goest from me to confront
Unequalled danger—to meet direful death ;
Out of the deep my soul cries No to thee.

ALFRED. Too long, Elswitha, have I known
thy soul

To hear the No that echoes from thy lips.
My Pleiad, who hath wandered from the sky

To light my path with thy celestial smile,
To bind my life with sweetest influence,
I love thee.

Think on that, when I am gone ;
Thou art the dear Beginning and the End,
The very warp and woof of my desire.
Be of good cheer—I go but to return ;
Then will I comfort thee as father might,
Solace with soothing as a kindly nurse,
And as an husband kiss thee. Fare thee well.

[ALFRED *embraces ELSWITHA and goes out by the door at the right, leaving it open.* ELSWITHA *sways for a moment, then, recovering herself, goes to the door; she stands on the threshold and looks down the path leading to the soldiers' quarters.*

ELSWITHA. The moonlight glimmers on
him as he goes ;
With hero's tread he walks the silvered way,

A man in majesty, a king in might—
And I am his Elswitha. His son's milk
Shall not be curdled by my foolish tears,
Nor by forebodings dried within my breast.

SCENE IV

*Three weeks later; Mid-May. A large Hall
in a house near Egbert-Stane.*

*A wild storm rages without. Within the lofty
Hall, an EALDORMAN, master of the house,
and many disaffected SAXONS, sit around a
table, having just finished their evening meal.*

KING ALFRED, disguised as a minstrel,
sits by the fire that burns in the centre of the
Hall—on the side farthest from the table;
the EALDORMAN and the SAXONS continue
their talk without noticing him, as the fire
lies between; apparently he is absorbed in
drying his garments that bear evidence of the
storm through which he has come; he had

entered the Hall a short time before, and asked permission to warm himself. The EALDORMAN and the SAXONS seem to have forgotten him.

THE EALD. What say you, Saxons, shall we tryst or no ?

The secret emissaries of the King
Have brought the word of trysting-time and
place ;

The Saxon host is rallying. As for me—
I balance go with go not, in my hand,
And fight with fight not !

FIRST SAX. Far-reaching issues for King
Alfred wait

On your decision—many follow you.

SECOND SAX. (*scornfully*). What bodes
another battle but defeat ?

No tryst for me ! A desolate dry place
This England ! What is left ? It is a land
O'errun with pagans—ruined, devastate.

The EALD. Our young King is a slender
reed that breaks

Beneath his burden ; all his treasury
Is emptied and his thews unstrung. God's
Blood !

I care not for his standard in these days.

SECOND SAX. (*indignantly*). Why should we
longer fight against our fate ?

'Twere better to cease struggle and to swim
In comfortable current with the tide ;
The men of Gloucester traffic with the Danes,
Bow to their Odin, and—they eat their corn.

THIRD SAX. I care not for my corn. I'd
see my fields

A harried wilderness, if I could keep
The warmth within my heart, that once I
knew

For our young Alfred on that glorious day
When he, an Atheling, on Ashdown Field,
Asked not consent of Ethelred his lord

But led our army on to victory.

Where now is he ?

THE EALD. He is snuffed out like a candle
in the dark.

'Tis true, he sets a tryst and bids prepare
For a new battle, with his word of hope,
But, were he valiant, it had been before.
My ready armour hath been burnished bright
Since Chippenham.

THIRD SAX. Give me a hero and a
famine-plague

Rather than fat fields with an idle King ;
I am for treaty with the Danes—

ALL THE SAX. And I—

THE EALD. (*turning and seeing ALFRED
whom he had forgotten*). Hie, minstrel !—
Tune your harp and sing a lay

Of heroes bold and dauntless deeds of war ;
The Lord hath sent you for this dreary hour.
The beating of the rain upon the house,

The sighing and the sobbing of the wind,
Drive me to madness—my hair-roots are
cold.

ALFRED. My harp is silent—and my harp-
strings mute.

THE EALD. Come to the board and warm
your throat with wine.

The boisterous wind that broke your harp,
perchance,

Hath chilled you.

ALFRED. In thanks to you, I drink no
wine to-night.

THE EALD. No wine—no song? A
merry minstrel this!

No gleeman could be livelier! I'd thought

To cheer our tide with tales adventurous.

I hate the bellowing tempest—hear it howl!

ALFRED. Far have I journeyed through
the rain-soaked wood,

Swept by the tempest on the open wold.

I cannot sing but I will word a tale—
If it will pleasure you.

THE EALD. 'Twill pleasure us,
And pass the moments, making us forget
The wind that wails like damned souls in Hell.

ALL. The tale—the tale—the tale !

[KING ALFRED moves his seat, thus
bringing himself more into view
of the others; he remains seated
and begins his tale in an assumed
voice, quietly, almost monotonously,
but as he continues his voice and
manner gather intensity.

ALFRED. In a far land that lay beneath
the moon,
Midway between the mountain and the
marsh—
Between the vision-summit and the slough
That darkly runs athwart this middle-earth,
In the dim morning of the dawn of days,
There lived a King who loved his people well;

For them he held a purpose and a prayer.
His was a land of fair fertility,
Of circling waters and of sunny skies ;
In the deep secret places of the hills
Riches were waiting those who sought for
them ;
And in the valleys ran the limpid streams
To water and to fructify the soil.
The King said to his mind :—

“ This realm shall rise
High above nations, by the grace of God ;
She shall be Wisdom’s spouse, light-crowned
and free.”

*Now, no man, as thou knowest, can get play
For his emprise unless he hath fit Tools ;
A King’s material and instruments
Of governance are a well-peopled land ;
He must have men of prayer, and men of war,
And men of work.* The King whose deeds I tell*

* King Alfred’s own words. See Appendix.

Brave Tools possessed. Thus was he glad
of heart.

But lo ! A horde of base barbarians
Came forth from caverns of the nameless
North ;

They overswept the country of the King,
Destroyed her Altar-fires and ravished her ;
To North and South the invaders pushed
their way ;

To East and West they planted pagan shrines.
The King reached forth to find his God-given
Tools—

Some were beside him, ready to his hand ;
Some, he found broken ; some had slipped
away ;

And some, like children frightened by a ghost,
Ran to the hands of the barbarians.

ALL. Traitors ! O cursèd Tools !

ALFRED. Nay, curse them not ;
Hear out the tale. The King was sore beset ;

Could he, with host depleted, overcome
The savage horde that overspread the land ?
That was the haunting question of the King.

FIRST SAX. What did he, minstrel ?

SECOND SAX. What did this poor King ?

ALFRED. He went to seek the knowledge
of his fate.

He clothed himself with garments of disguise,
And sought the camp of the barbarians ;
He entered in and stood before their King,
The cruel King, whose vow was echoing
To hew him into pieces, when they met.

SECOND SAX. He went alone ?

THIRD SAX. Alone ?—A hero's deed !

ALFRED. About the camp he wound a
gracious way,

As any minstrel might who thought to please—
As I came here, but now, and entered in
From out the storm and sat beside your fire
To find a generous hospitality—

They looked not on him as an enemy ;
Wide as sweet music is the minstrel's home.
Savage in all things, the barbarians,
Moved by soft strains, were tame and gentle-
wise,

As Cerberus, the hideous Hound of Hell,
And the grim warder of that dreadful gate
Were moved by strains of Orpheus, when he
played

Upon his harp melodious. The King,
Of whom I tell, possessed an harp sweet-
strung,

Low-vibrant with deep woodland memories ;
His song-hoard had been gained from many
folk,

His voice was never wearied—

THE EALD. (*interrupting*). Would that yours
Were like it, minstrel, you could sing the tale.

FIRST SAX. We need no music for heroic
deeds.

ALFRED. Alone—the King as minstrel faced
his foes ;
Alone—he stood before his enemy ;
Blithely he roamed about the idle camp,
Assuming welcome and receiving it ;
He saw the savage army, heard their oaths—
Flung forth like javelins—to their false gods,
To grind the King and all his subjects fine
As dust before a land-storm. Loud they
swore
To bend the stubborn neck of every man
Left in the kingdom, when the broadsword's
work
Was finished there. Then laughed the
Minstrel-King—
It seemed that he was laughing at his song,
And they laughed with him at the jocund
words—
He laughed, forsooth, to hear the vaunting
boast

Of the bold King, knowing its vanity,
Laughed lightly in the face of that fierce
King.

THIRD SAX. Brave hero ! I would follow
such a man
Into the everlasting pit.

SECOND SAX. And I.

ALFRED. He felt keen gladness throbbing
through his frame.

To be encircled by the chance of death,
Death terrible with torture, yet to hold
Within his daring hand the mastery
Of the adventure, was a conquest fine
To whet his temper and to stir his pride.
Gained was the knowledge of his enemy,
Their number and their weakness and their
strength,
A solid step-stone unto victory.

ALL. Hail to the King ! Hail to the hero
bold !

ALFRED. He left the camp of the barbarians—

He knew their secrets and it was enough.
Then through the night and through the day
he sped

Back to his camp. Lo ! On the second
night,

A tempest broke upon him on the wold ;
The pent-up water-spouts of heaven burst
forth

And poured on him their deluge ; he was fain
To shelter him at some warm welcoming
hearth ;

He found a friend's door, and he entered in ;
They knew him not—he sat down in their
midst—

And then he heard these words from his own
Tool :

“ Our young King is a slender reed that breaks
Beneath his burden—all his treasury

Is emptied, and his thews unstrung—God's
Blood !

I care not for his standard in these days."

[ALFRED *rises.*

Whilst he before the enemy had stood,
Gay laughter moved him ! When he heard
these words

Then he knew sorrow—then his harp-string
broke !

[As ALFRED has been speaking, excitement has been gaining among the SAXONS ; it reaches its height as he finishes ; they fall on their knees and bow their heads, overcome by remorse.

THE EALD. (*offering his sword*). Sir King
— forgive — forgive me ! Take my
sword !—

THIRD SAX. By God ! Here is my hero !
I am his

For life—for death—for ever !

ALL.

O forgive—

FIRST SAX. Most noble gracious King—
forgive !—ALFRED (*taking off his disguise*). Rise—my
brave Tools—forgiven.

Ye knew me not—

And now ye know me ! The appointed
trystIs Egbert-Stane. The Saxons gather fast ;
We hasten on our way to keep the tryst ;
We wait our followers—will you be there ?ALL (*rising, drawing their swords and lifting
them high*). Every man—my lord !

SCENE V

*Two weeks after the Battle of Ethandun**The Forest of Selwood. The Scene is the same as
in Scene I. The forest is now green with
the full foliage of late May. Afternoon.*

Enter a group of SAXON SOLDIERS, singing.

THE SOLDIERS (*singing*).

We met the Danes upon the downs,

With battle-axe and brand ;

We drove the Danes across the downs,

We drove them from the land.

O the salt seas !

O the oak trees !

O the mighty men of England !

We drove the Danes across the downs,

We drove them to the sea ;

The Golden Dragon holds the downs

With golden victory.

O the salt seas !

O the oak trees !

O the mighty men of England !

FIRST SOL. Now comes a better ending to
that song

Than when we sung it hitherto ; then Danes
Were driven to their far eyrie, but returned
With the returning tide, at change of moon.
Our Alfred, England's darling, has achieved
A goodlier victory ; he has kept them here—
His vanquished enemies—within his realm.

SECOND SOL. None but a God-descended
conqueror

Could turn the blood-steeped Danes to
Englishmen,

Could make the mighty Guthrum change his
name,

Forswear his heathen gods, and bend his
neck

To Saxon sovereignty.

THIRD SOL. By the Lord God !

That is a victory ! The Sea-World's King
Our darling's godson ! Wine and mead and
ale

Are running in my veins.

SECOND SOL. A master stroke
For England—She is saved ! Hark you—I
hear
The coming of the King ! Let us dispatch
His business.

(Calling.) Gurth !

ALL (calling.) Gurth !—Gurth !

*[From the centre, where the forest is
more open, comes GURTH the
neat-herd; he is a rough, awk-
ward man in peasant dress; he
has a shock of red hair, a loud
voice, and a self-satisfied manner.*

FIRST SOL. Make haste, man ! You are
crawling like a snail.

Know you a neat-herd hereabouts named
Gurth ?

GURTH (gruffly). And if I did, what matters
that to you ?

SECOND SOL. Find him. The mighty
Alfred, England's King,

Would speak with him. Don't swallow me,
my man,

'Tis simple statement ; there's no need to
drop

Your gaping jaw down to your belly—Come !
The King awaits you.

GURTH (*trembling*). Sir—the King—the
King !

What have I done ? Good Lord ! What
have I done ?

KING ALFRED *enters with Thanes and soldiers.*

GURTH *falls on his knees.*

GURTH (*stuttering with confusion*). Almighty
King—All-glorious one !—

ALFRED. Silence !

I am not God ; use not His attributes
In your address to any mortal man.

GURTH. O Sir—O King ! I did not do
it !

ALFRED. You have a daughter, Gurth,
Elfreda named.

(*Aside.*) From dankest bogs the loveliest lilies
grow.

GURTH. A daughter?—Ay, Elfreda. O
great King—

It is a plot—she did not do it—

ALFRED. A quick denial breeds suspicion,
Gurth;

I am the witness of Elfreda's deed.

GURTH. Holy St. Peter! She has ruined
me!

I always told her mother—

ALFRED. Cease, man!—Naught but the
good, Elfreda gives—

The life of Alfred, England's king, she saved;
I would, remembering, reward the deed.

GURTH. Ye devils! But the Mass-Priest
spoke the truth—

He said a jug too much befogs a man—

I'm drunk and dreaming. There's Elfreda,
now—

It will unfog me when I see her face.

[As GURTH is speaking, ELFREDA is heard singing.

ELFREDA. *Violet so blue,*

O to be you

Down in the cool green grass !

ELFREDA enters from the right ; over her arm is a garland of flowers that she has woven, and her hands are filled with other flowers ; when she sees the KING, the song dies on her lips, and the garland and flowers fall to the ground.

ELFREDA. My minstrel—and my King!

Have come to-day to thank you in the name
Of England.

[Taking her hand.

When it broke the bread, this hand

Knew not it was for England. What slight
things

Become momentous in man's destiny !

[*Turning to GURTH, who has been overcome with astonishment at ELFREDA's recognition of the KING.*

Attend us, Gurth, we have a word to say.

(*Aside.*) I would I were as potent with the Danes

To strike them powerless without e'en a blow.

(*Aloud.*) I cannot loiter here with lifeless men—

GURTH. O mighty King ! I am befogged !—

[*ALFRED, smiling, pricks GURTH with his sword.*

GURTH (*aside*). Swlf ! That unfogs me !

(*Aloud.*) Great King ! Is this a jest for laughter played

On a poor neat-herd ?

ALFRED. No—a truth!

Lost in this forest I had wandered far,
Forgetting food ;—stern Nature cried aloud
Too jealous of mortality, I sank
Beside the way with weariness. Your child
Then found me, fed me from her share,
revived

My ebbing strength, and knew not what she
did,

Nor unto whom she did it. In this hour
Of England's triumph, I would recompense
The deed. Wherefore, to you I give an
house

In Cornwall and two hides of land ; you now
Become a freeman, by the Saxon law.
Also, a dower for maintenance I give.
My messengers will come with further word.

[GURTH makes violent contortions in an effort to speak, but, finding it impossible, bows his head.

ELFREDA. For mother!—O my King! No
more the cold,
The cruel winter cold, will nip those arms
That held me when I was a little child!

[*ELFREDA stoops to gather the flowers
she had dropped; selecting one,
she offers it to the KING.*

Here is a fairy flower for thanks, my King,
From the enchanted circle in the wood.

GURTH (*aside, making desperate efforts to stop
ELFREDA*). She has no fear of man or
God or king!

(*Aloud.*) Hold your rude tongue, you brazen
child, speak not
To kings in every-day!

ALFRED (*accepting the flower and placing it
in his armour*). Symbol of life—the flower
upon the steel!

[*Through the wood, at the left, is heard
the coming of many feet.* ALFRED

turns his head ; his face lights with pleasure.

My royal lady !—

[*Leaving GURTH and ELFREDA,*
ALFRED walks to the left as
ELSWITHA and her MAIDENS enter.

ELSWITHA. An hundred thousand welcomes
—O my liege !

ALFRED. O shining Flower of England !
Sun-begot,

New-bathed with dew of morning, thou, indeed,

Art rich reward for hardships well-endured ;
Now battles, dangers, weariness and war,
Are all forgot in thee.

ELSWITHA. And I in thee
Forget the days of thistle and of thorn
At Athelney—so many days, my lord—
The days were cycles and the hours were
years.

[As they speak, ELFREDA and GURTH are standing at the left in silence, not knowing whether to go or to stay. Suddenly ELSWITHA becomes conscious of them ; she looks quickly at ELFREDA, and about the wood in a questioning way, but so veiled that ALFRED does not notice it.

ELSWITHA (*aside*). My feet kept pace with my impatient heart

To meet my Love ; he loitered as he came.

(*Aloud.*) You paused, my lord, upon your way to us—

ALFRED. Yea, for a work of justice to that child ;

She saved your Alfred's life.

ELSWITHA (*apparently seeing ELFREDA for the first time*). A happy child !

In sooth, she seems o'er-frail for such a deed

ALFRED. God chooses weak things to confound the strong ;

I will recount the circumstance to thee.

ELSWITHA (*with sudden intuition*). 'Tis not your wont to wear a flower, my lord—

ALFRED (*smiling*). This is a fairy flower.

[ELSWITHA looks at ELFREDA and sees
that the flowers in her hand are
like the one which ALFRED wears ;
she draws herself up with a proud
movement of reserve.

ELSWITHA (*coldly*). I did not know
That thou hadst found, once more, the tales
we leave
In babbling babyhood.

ALFRED (*unconscious of her tone and mood*). We touch the spring
Of our immortal life when we become
A little child, again.

[ALFRED and ELSWITHA walk into the wood, followed by the MAIDENS, THANES, and SOLDIERS, who have been talking together in low tones. As they pass on, NUMANERA speaks to a MAIDEN.

NUMANERA (*whispering*). Houses are cheap in England—cheap as bread.

THE MAIDEN. Our noble King is gracious.

NUMANERA (*suspiciously*). Gracious ?—Ha ! [GURTH and ELFREDA have not moved.

GURTH stands with open mouth as though dazed ; ELFREDA picks up the garland and dances, twining it around her, and dancing in and out of it as she sings.

ELFREDA. Violet so blue,
 O to be you !

Down in the cool green grass.
 Violet so blue,
 O to be you !

Watching the clouds as they pass.

GURTH. Elfreda, am I mad ?

ELFREDA (*kissing him*). Now, are you ?

Nay !

My prayers are answered, that is all. I
prayed

To God, and asked the fairies, whom He
loves,

To send a healthier home than that poor hut
For mother—

GURTH. It is wonderful !

ELFREDA. O—nay !

Naught is more wonderful than everything.

ACT II

SCENE I

*Autumn of the following year—Cornwall—
The Sea-shore*

KING ALFRED stands on the shore, looking
out to sea

ALFRED. O deep sea-waters, surging ever-
more

In the wide way appointed unto you

By the great Warden of the Universe !

Mysterious, unfathomable, you fling

Perpetual challenge to the mind of man.

Here, on this foam-flecked shore, I stand and
gaze

Upon the far horizon, where the blue

Of sky-dome dips to touch the gleaming grey.

What if beyond this sea-realm there is land ?
I will build ships to push the question
through

These tossing and tumultuous waves. I will
Send forth my sailors on the untracked way
To bring an answer from that billowy world.

Othere has told the story of the North ;
His words are as a meteor to my mind ;

They stir me to adventure, like to his.

Had I been born to lesser dignity,
Had I no kingly claims to hold me here,
I would go forth upon that moving world,
And tilt a tourney with the great spearman
To wrest his secrets from him, which he
keeps

Behind his vast and foamy fortress hid.

Last night, as I lay sleepless on my bed,
I heard a voice say : "Look, what is to be !" Then, like the sheet our blessed Lord let
down

To Peter, lo ! I saw a vision there.
On some high pinnacle I seemed to stand ;
Beneath my eyes a greater England spread ;
To the far East she stretched—where, radiant,
The splendid morning rises ; to the West—
Where the great sun in majesty goes down.
I saw a mighty race born of this land,
Speaking one language, worshipping one God,
Drawing as common sap their nourishment
From one great mother-vine ; new branches
grown—
For separate climbing—but bound, each to
each,
In strength of heritage and unity.
Great ships I saw, like shuttles back and forth
Weaving and interweaving a firm web
In friendly commerce for a common gain ;
New order ruled and just and righteous
laws ;
And all the sons and daughters of this race

Were clothed upon with Christ-beholding
faith

As with white-shining garment. This I saw—
Was it a dream—or was it prophecy ?

Caedmon had visions—he was not a Saint—
The consecrated Bede tells many a tale
Of visions granted to the sons of men ;
Perchance this was, like theirs, a Godspeech
sent

To comfort me with promise of the goal
In my unequal fight with circumstance.

The war-tracked land—burnt, harried, de-
vastate ;

The unschooled, ignorant people, seeing not ;
The work which calls to me from dawn
to eve ;

Ofttimes o'erwhelm me and dismay my soul.
I am like one who strives alone to fell
A giant forest on a storm-black night.

[In the distance CEDRIC appears.]

Cedric!—My heart-of-oak! His sturdy ways
Are pleasant to me.

[*The King turns to meet Cedric.*

Cedric—I know your countenance, full well;
I can discern a pent-up flood kept back
By courteous control. Speak! If thy King
Can serve thee—it is done.

CEDRIC. My liege lord is a great and
glorious king;
I am a churl-begot, a lowly-born,
And this he ever maketh me forget.

ALFRED. *It is the mind of man that giveth rank;*
*Man's truth is his nobility.**

CEDRIC (*aside, with emotion*). O King
Of mind! O King of very truth!

ALFRED.	Cedric—
You here have followed me to speak—	
speak on.	

* King Alfred's own words. See Appendix.

CEDRIC. I speak for Alfred, King of England, sir.

He placed the Golden Dragon on this Isle—
It floats in triumph, but it stands too still !
He is the Julius Cæsar of to-day ;
He and the Roman Pontiff could divide
The earth, would he but lead to conquest new
The Golden Dragon and the Saxon host.

ALFRED. Say it not, Cedric. Your en-kindling words

Strike on my ready mind like flint on steel.
If my desire were captain of my will,
The whole wide world would be my battle-field

Until it was my vassal—Tempt me not !
I follow Christ who is the Prince of Peace.
Let not that doubting smile lurk in your eyes,
My Thane, who stood beside me on the field—
I fought for Christ and for His sovereignty
Upon this Island. What is done—is done ;

And should again the dusky raven dare
Upon our hearthstones its dark shadow cast,
Or hide our altars 'neath its ebon wings,
Then will I fight again as I have fought ;
But proud ambition's call I follow not,
Nor yield to lust of conquest or of fame,
For Fame is but the vaunting of this world.
A glorious fate for England I foresee ;
But ere she meets it, she must be remade.
A lawless people, restless and unlearned,
Surge through our border as the untamed
surf
Surges perpetually upon the shore.
Swart and woe-ridden lies our fruitful land ;
Fierce lust of gain-getting possesses it ;
Heathen communication hath corrupted it,
And senseless superstition holds the glass
To blinking eyes disordered by the past.
Naught bindeth a man's soul down to the
dust

As ignorance ; naught can so dower his soul
With deed of manumission—as to know.

Poor England sits in moonless, starless night
Beside a fast-closed door, unschooled, un-
taught ;

Men cannot read the words they say to God
Nor read the words that God hath said to
them ;

And yet, a little way beyond the door
Is Light—and Wisdom waiting with his torch.
Is it not better to teach men to think,
To feed them with the eternal Bread of Life,
Than it can be to lay them in the dust
Silent and stark ?

CEDRIC (*smiling*). I pray you, did you ask
that of the Danes ?

ALFRED. I asked the Danes one question—
“ Will you yield ? ”

And straightway made them answer “ Yea ” to
me.

I then obeyed the voice of God on high
And now I would obey Him in His peace.
The King who pours his subjects' valour
forth

Or seeks afar new conquest for his pride,
Leaving the harrow standing in his home,
Is but a fool consumed by greed of gain.

CEDRIC. O not for gain I plead—but that
my King,

Who is the destined sovereign of the world,
May leave therein his monument—

ALFRED. I work
For God and England—my best monument
A godlier England.

Champion-wise, my Thane,
You met my thought in battle—meet it now;
High vision of a loftier warfare looms
A warfare with the forces of the dark
Not transitory, temporal, but fraught
With everlasting issues.

CEDRIC (*with enthusiasm*). My King, I
follow where you lead, beneath
Your royal standard on the crimson field,
Or in the quiet pastures green of peace.

ALFRED (*drawing his sword*). There spoke
the faithful servant of his King !
Cedric, look on this sword ! Behold the point
Made sharp for service ! Here, upon the hilt,
A cross is wrought—the symbol of our faith ;
This holds an inward meaning, mystical.
A Christian sword is consecrate to Christ
To fight His holy battles for the Truth ;
Those battles won, then should a Christian king
Reverse the sword—thus, Cedric—and hold
high
The Christ-cross for the desolate dark world,
To lead men on in God's name to the light.

[ALFRED *reverses the sword and holds*
the cross high above his head.
CEDRIC *falls upon his knees.*

SCENE II

The following afternoon. Cornwall.

A beautiful wood. The trees are touched with yellow. A carpet of thick moss covers the ground. ELFREDA comes from the left with a buoyant dancing step ; she is dressed in white.

ELFREDA. O joyous-hearted, music-haunted wood !

O dew-fresh, sun-and-shadow woven wood !
O happy wood ! Thou art my heart's own home !

I love the heavenward-reaching trees that sing,

Waving their tossing boughs to lure me high ;
I love the wood-flowers peeping from the moss,

The lichen and the bracken and the fern !

Would I were free as any wingèd bird

To wander through the forest all the day !
The King hath dowered us with dignity ;
I am well-mindful of his benefits ;
But—O—I would that he had left me free
To tryst and dance with fairies in the wood !
Now is my father set about with thought
Of guarding me and making me a dame,
A very stiff and stately little dame.

[*The strains of a harp are heard, coming nearer.*

Hark ! 'Tis a harp sweet-singing in the wood.
Some happy, strolling, minstrel-harper comes.

[*She looks down the path.*

Nay ! 'Tis a courtier, sumptuously arrayed ;
Now will Elfreda hear how courtiers sing !

[*She seats herself under a large tree beside the path. From the right enters SIR CORNEWULF, Cup-bearer to the KING, playing on his harp and singing.*

CORNEWULF (*singing*).

O the Spear and the Spindle
Must parted be this day !

For the Spear must speed to battle away,
A battle to wage and a battle to win,
But the Spindle must bide in the shadow
And spin—

And spin.

O sorry for the Spindle,
For she can never feel
The glory of battle, when steel strikes steel,
The rapture of the rushing, the clangling and
the din,
For the Spindle must bide in the shadow
And spin—

And spin.

[As CORNEWULF sings the last line, he
has nearly reached the tree under
which ELFREDA is seated; she
rises and steps into the path.

ELFREDA. *I will not—nay—I do not like to spin.*

CORNEWULF. Who art thou, maiden,
beautiful as spring ?

ELFREDA. I am Elfreda, daughter of that
Gurth

The King made free.

CORNEWULF (*aside*). Her eyes are bluer
than the blue of heaven.

Her hair is sunnier than the summer sun ;
When she unfoldeth, she will grace the world
And crown a man's estate.

(Aloud.) Fair maiden, sit
Beneath the branches of the burnished
beech,

And I will make a little song for thee !

ELFREDA. Art thou King Alfred's man ?

CORNEWULF. Unto the death !

I am the great King's Cup-bearer—my name
Is Cornewulf.

ELFREDA (*leaning against the tree*). I will not sit—for sitting argues stay—

But I will hear you, if you will not sing
Of Spindles in the shadow.

CORNEWULF. I had not seen thee, when I made that song.

[CORNEWULF *sings to the accompaniment of his harp, looking at ELFREDA as he sings.*

CORNEWULF (*singing*).

Beneath her maiden snows,
All petal-folded deep,
Lieth the fair primrose,
Asleep—asleep.

Her sun I now will be,
My quickening fire shall make
Her virgin heart for me
Awake—awake !

[ELFREDA *listens to the song without emotion.*

CORNEWULF. Thou art not yet awake,
Elfreda.

ELFREDA. Awake? I am awake; look in
mine eyes.

CORNEWULF (*aside*). 'Twere fire to passion
to gaze long therein.

(*Aloud*.) Maiden, thy soul still sleeps and
waits the dawn
Of love. Wilt thou, when thy dawn-time
hath come,

Remember Cornewulf?

ELFREDA (*looking critically at CORNEWULF*).
Remember thee?—

Thou art not so comely as the King.

CORNEWULF. Maiden,
No man is comely by his side.

ELFREDA (*hesitatingly*). Thy voice
Is not so wondrous as the King's.

CORNEWULF. The King's?
No voice is like the King's, but I will say
Low words to thee that he will never say.

ELFREDA. Wilt thou ? What are they ?

CORNEWULF. Ask me not to-day ;

The hour for words will come—

ELFREDA. How shall I know, sir, that I
am awake

When now I know not that I am asleep ?

CORNEWULF. Women sleep fast and know
not that they sleep,

But, when they waken, then straightway they
know ;

Soon thou wilt be a woman, lovely maid.

ELFREDA. I am a woman now, King Alfred
says.

CORNEWULF (*aside*). He will approve my
choice—all things beclad

In beauty are by Alfred well approved.

(*Aloud.*) If one should come to woo thee,
maiden, say,

“ I pledged my troth to Cornewulf, who gave
His heart to me, in the same hour we met.”

ELFREDA. No pledges and no promise
have I given,

But I will give not unto him who asks,
Remembering thee—Sir Cornewulf.

CORNEWULF. Enough !

True love compelleth love by Love's own law.
Keep thy fair field of flowers unpledged, and I
Will win the field and foster the fair flowers.
Before the time unfolds, remember this—
I hold within my hand authority
By my lord's grace ; I am thy trusty knight ;
If thou hast need of service, call to me—
To Cornewulf, Cup-bearer to the King.

[CORNWULF bows reverently to
ELFREDA, who courtesies ; he goes
off to the left.

ELFREDA (*looking after him*). Sir Corne-
wulf, Cup-bearer to the King !—

I'm very glad the Court to Cornwall came.

[NUMANERA comes in sight.

How pretty is the scarlet of that robe
Amid the green!—A lady of the Court,
She treads as one who walks in palaces.

[NUMANERA *enters from the right.*

NUMANERA. I saw thee, maiden, with Sir
Cornewulf.

'Tis well to have a care with courtiers
bold;

Let them not lure thee to the woods alone.

ELFREDA. Why?—Lady—

NUMANERA. Men are oftentimes dangerous.

ELFREDA. I found no danger in Sir Cornewulf.

NUMANERA (*shrugging her shoulders, looking slyly at ELFREDA.*). Perchance, you saw him not!—You love the King?

ELFREDA. With all my heart. Do you not love the King?

NUMANERA (*with sarcastic homage.*). I honour him.

ELFREDA. When honour moves me, then
Straightway I love.

NUMANERA (*regarding her searchingly*). The
King hath dowered you ?—
You saved his life ?

ELFREDA. I gave him bread—no more.
NUMANERA. Tell me the story !
ELFREDA. There is naught to tell ;
Our gracious King is mighty in exchange ;
I gave him bread — he made my father
free.

NUMANERA. And is that all ?
ELFREDA. O no ! He gave us land,
A stately house, and many royal gifts.

NUMANERA (*with irony*). It is not strange
you saw not Cornewulf.

ELFREDA. I saw him, lady—I can see
him now.

NUMANERA. 'Tis courtly manners to con-
ceal your thought.

There yet are many things to learn, fair maid,
Ere you are Court-cut—will you learn of me ?

ELFREDA. I thank you, lady.

NUMANERA (*aside*). She clothes herself with
chastity for charm ;

She wears the garments of sweet innocence ;
Methinks the wench hath not so much to
learn !

Her power is waxing—I must weld a link.

(*Aloud*.) Soon you will come to Court ?

ELFREDA. 'Tis as the King
Commandeth me.

NUMANERA (*smiling*). He is your master—
then ?

ELFREDA (*remembering CORNEWULF'S
phrase*). Unto the death—

NUMANERA. Sit here, with me, and I
Will tell you many stories of the Court.

ELFREDA. Your pardon, lady—I must
hasten home.

NUMANERA (*sweetly*). My little Saxon maiden, we are friends ?

ELFREDA (*with reserve*). Lady, I wish you well.

[ELFREDA bows to NUMANERA and goes off to the right, walking more slowly than is her wont.

NUMANERA (*looking after ELFREDA, her eyes narrowing unpleasantly*). Piece fits to piece—I see the pattern whole !

A little child—with little winning ways—

A bit of bread—and freedom for a fee—

So blew the breezes then, perchance, but now

The blossom ripens to the luscious fruit ;

Her form is rounded and her proud young breasts

Swell with the rising tide of womanhood.

Despite his prayers and his philosophies

This Alfred is no paragon. I heard

A secret gossip of his early youth

From one who hunted with him in these
woods ;

Temptation of the flesh beset him, then ;
What hath been comes again—men do not
change.

[Starting with sudden remembrance.]

At last I understand the mystery !—
The secret of the jewel of the King !
For many days Cesario hath wrought,
With jealous pride of the artificer,
Upon a jewel ; with his teasing smile
Called me Pandora, Eve, and likesome names,
When I essayed to trip from him the tale.
Then, fearing silence more than word dis-
creet,
He warned me breathe no mention of the
thing—
The King would make a secret gift, he said,
No one must know, and, least of all, the
Queen.

Here, in the wood, led by the guiding hand
Of my avenging Angel, do I chance
Upon the wanton secret. O kind Fate,
To send me in my seething mood of wrath
This instrument of vengeance !

[NUMANERA *pulls a delicate branch
from a bush and, ruthlessly strip-
ping off the leaves, scatters them
about her.*

I hate the Queen !—I hate the Saxon brood !
But most of all I hate the arrogant Queen !
Long have I hated her imperious pride—
It ever stirs the ancient blood of Rome
To hot and fierce rebellion in my veins—
But I have bowed in feigned humility
That I might linger where Sir Helmwulf
passed.

Last night I stood behind the royal seat
And saw a thing that let the devils loose
Within me. Helmwulf's eyes I saw turn swift

Upon Elswitha—when she marked him not,
And deep therein white worship burned. To
feel

That look shine on me I would crawl through
Hell.

Who is this Mercian dame that she should
hold

The dower of all things emptied in her lap ?
The royal diadem—King Alfred's love—
The lofty heart of Helmwulf, peerless knight !

[*NUMANERA stoops, plucks some red
berries from a low bush and crushes
them in her hands ; the red juice
slowly trickles between her fingers
and falls upon her gown.*

The purple from her shoulders I will strip
And weave for her a girdle of sharp thorns—
A sorrowing woman she shall bend her head !
Must I alone weep through the haunted
night ?

Must I alone pluck love with bitter hands
From out my heart?—Ah! Let *her* writhe
awhile!
The God of Justice sends me my revenge.

SCENE III

*An hour later. The house in Cornwall given
to GURTH by the KING*

A large Hall. To the right, a door stands partly open; in the centre wall there is a closed door. GURTH, the neat-herd, dressed as a Saxon gentleman, walks up and down the Hall. DRIDDA, his wife, sits on a stiff wooden seat; her hair is grey, and her kind but careworn face is weather-beaten; her hands are awkwardly folded, as though unaccustomed to idleness, and she moves as though unaccustomed to sitting still.

GURTH. Ho you! Sit up upon your chair
more straight,

Old dame, and do not wallow. You have look

Of churl's hut; noble ladies sit up straight!

[*With a sudden jerk, DRIDDA straightens herself.*

And close your gaping mouth! A lady's mouth
Is shut from flies.

[*DRIDDA closes her mouth with a snap.*

That is more seemly, Drid.

DRIDDA. How can I tell you what I have
to tell?

GURTH. You silly woodcock! Open it for
that.

DRIDDA. Your tunic you have put on hind
before.

You look like any neat-herd in good clothes
That he has borrowed for an holiday.

GURTH. Swlf! So it is. This costly finery
Is more difficult to match than fagots.

You are not all a fool.

DRIDDA. No, Gurth, somewhat was over-
left for you.

GURTH. 'Tis easy to be master of a house—

DRIDDA (*interrupting*). But not to look like one.

This fine estate as she were born thereto.

Why is it? She is ours, and we—and we—

DRIDDA. Come, say it out—we look, for
all our boast,

Like neat-herds.

GURTH. Talk not of neat-herds ! . What
are they to us ?

DRIDDA (*chuckling*). I saw a neat-herd, one
night—in a dream!

GURTH (*testily*). Talk not your folly to
Elfreda, Drid—

Her lofty station she must learn, nor run
Like a wild round-eyed hare within the wood,
Singing as common wench upon the way.

Ladies don't sing.

DRIDDA. Poor ladies! And poor me!

Your ladies cannot sit nor sing nor speak !

'Tis very weary to be gentlefolks.

GURTH. Shame on you, Drid !

[*Drawing himself up.*

We each must fit the place
We're born to. Churls are churls, but gentle-
men

Are gentlemen. How will I come to Court
If your Elfreda makes them laugh at me
By manners of the soil ?

DRIDDA. *You go to Court ?*

[*There is a noise at the door, and
singing is heard without.*

A VOICE (*singing*).

This merry, merry world is but a shell !

Crack it goes, and who can tell

If it be Heaven or if it be Hell !

Call for the Priest, and call for the Bell,

It may be Heaven, and it may be Hell.

DRIDDA. Who is the clatterer before our door

Dinning so loud that most unholy song ?

GURTH (*going to the door and opening it*). Why, here's a jolly gentleman from Court

As I of Court am speaking. 'Tis a friend—

A friend !—

A little hunch-backed man, gaily dressed in motley-coloured garments, enters ; his eyes are sharp and bright ; he is laughing ; he is MONFICHET, the King's Fool.

MONFICHET. The door stood open as I passed this way,

I paused to say good-morrow.

(*Aside.*) I would see
How fits the neat-herd to a stately house ;
It is a study for philosophers.

GURTH (*with effusion*). You're very welcome—very welcome, sir—

O very welcome !

MONFICHET. Welcomes so many bode
you wish me gone !

(*Aside.*) But yesterday I met this vulgar
Gurth.

I'm near the King—ergo, I am a friend ;
He knows not of my quality at Court ;
It is enough I breathe the same fine air ;
Better I like the baiting of the lords
Than fawning flattery.

(*Aloud.*) Good Morrow, Gurth !
Good Morrow to the Lady of the House !

DRIDDA (*aside*). I've seen such curious
things since I was rich !

(*Aloud.*) I think, sir, that's a most unholy song.

MONFICHET. Madam, don't think. There's
nothing so fatigues
The brain as thought. I never think, and
thus—

I keep my beauty, madam, as you see,
Untouched by time.

DRIDDA (*aside, but loudly enough to be heard*). Poor gentleman ! I fear
He's lost his wits.

MONFICHET. Yea, madam, that I have.
But Gurth hath double quantity for two.

GURTH (*drawing himself up proudly*). My
wits and brains have brought me where
you see.

Had I less brains, I'd be a neat-herd still.

MONFICHET (*aside*). Were he still neat-
herd, he would have more brains.

(*Aloud*). Thy brain is a bright comet—with
a tail.

GURTH. Men know me, Drid—You say
I'm only Gurth !

MONFICHET. A man is ever more than
his wife sees—

If Gurth were only Gurth—why—he would
be

Gurth only—that is plain.

GURTH (*aside, to DRIDDA*). A learned wit !
His words are very wise !

DRIDDA (*aside, to GURTH*). They have no
sense !

I wonder—is he drunk, or is he mad ?

MONFICHET. Fair lady—wilt thou take me
for thy knight ?

I'll crown thee Queen of Beauty in the list ;
I'll wear thy colours in the tournament.

What is thy colour, lady ?

DRIDDA (*much confused*). Blue—no, red—
(*Aside.*) Mad — mad — he is as mad as
March—

(*Aloud.*) Green—yellow—

MONFICHET. Madam, must I wear rain-
bows on my helm ?

DRIDDA (*aside*). Mad as a cock that's shut
up in a pen !

(*Aloud.*) Sir, are there many like you at
the Court ?

MONFICHET. I am the one and only of my kind.

DRIDDA. God knows it is enough, sir.

MONFICHET. Unhappy me ! Now must I die of love !

DRIDDA (*aside*). Mad ! He is raving mad.
O ! I am sure of it.

MONFICHET. I heard you, madam. All the world is mad ;

I am not madder than the whole mad race.
In sooth, this madman, knowing he is mad,
Is a sane madman not so mad as most.

DRIDDA (*aside, putting her hand to her head*).
If he stays longer, I shall go mad too.

[*Aloud, rising from her seat.*
Poor gentleman ! You need a medicine.
I go to find you one—

MONFICHET. Save your steps, lady ; seek no medicine ;
My madness is immortal. I must go ;

My lord the King awaits me—

[MONFICHET bows with elaborate ceremony and goes out.

DRIDDA. In God's name, Gurth, who is the gentleman ?

GURTH. He is a mighty minion of the Court.

He often rides beside the King ; methinks
He is a famous counsellor or reeve ;
I met him yesterday upon the road,
And we became the merry friends you see.

DRIDDA (*aside*). O what a merry friendship !

GURTH. My name I told him, and he told me his—

It was as long as charity ; it breaks
The jaw to say it, so I have forgot.

[*In the distance, Elfreda can be heard singing.*

Hear that Elfreda singing ! By the Saints !

No gentleman will stoop to marry her,
And she shall not stoop lower.

DRIDDA. Let her be.

You may be wise, Gurth, but you're foolish
too—

Elfreda is Elfreda. Let her be.

*[As ELFREDA comes nearer, the words
of the song are heard; she enters
singing; she bears a branch of
scarlet autumn berries and waves
it as she sings.]*

ELFREDA (*singing*).

Deep in the woods the fairies dance
Merrily, merrily,
One—two—three !

Through the tree-boughs the moonbeams
glance

Silverly, silverly,
Fairies to see.

When in the night the neat-herds sleep,
 Healthily, healthily,
 Four—five—six !

Then to the herds the fairies creep
 Stealthily, stealthily,
 Up to their tricks.

GURTH (*severely*). Sing not of neat-herds—
 they are lowly folk.

DRIDDA (*softly, that GURTH may not hear*).
 Vex not thy father with remembering ;
 Men like to rise by what they have for-
 got.

(*Aloud.*) Where hast thou been, sweet Mis-
 chief ?

ELFREDA. In the woods.

GURTH (*crossly*). The woods—the woods—
 for evermore the woods !

What would the great King say to your mad
 pranks ?

When will you learn to spin ?—

The wedding smock

Is woven by your mother, and men mark
Your beauty !

ELFREDA (*lifting her finger and speaking softly*). Father ! I am fast asleep.

GURTH. What means this nonsense ?

ELFREDA (*laughing*). Ask Sir Cornewulf,
Cup-bearer to the King.

GURTH. Cup-bearer ?—King ?—

DRIDDA (*tenderly*). What whimsies wild run
riot in your head ?

GURTH. Whimsies or whimsies not — 'tis
time for her

To wed ; she is a woman—fully grown—

DRIDDA (*interrupting*). Let her be virgin
longer, Gurth, I pray ;

A woman's burden weighs when she is wed.

GURTH. Come, Dridda, stop your mouth
with honey-mead,

And teach Elfreda no fool tattle-stuff.

Elfreda, wait me here—

[*GURTH and DRIDDA go out by the closed door.*

ELFREDA. No solemn speech shall spoil these joyous days ;

Better it pleases me to hear the birds Sing nesting - songs than talk of wedding smocks.

Heigh-ho for fun ! A jocund trick to play ! 'Tis merriment to watch the puzzled frown On father's forehead, hear his muttered words—

They sound like thunder,—but I see the bow !—

In this old wall I found a tiny door ; It lies concealed in this dark corner, here.

[*Going to the corner at the left.*

A thin-edged board is loose and one light touch Opens the secret. Like a little rat

I entered, yesterday, the opening ;
 I found a tiny passage—there I'll hide.
 Was it not made in very sooth for me ?
 When father comes I'll imitate the birds ;
 The while he ponders, I will run to kiss
 Away the frowning. What if stranger comes ?
 I will hide close till he be gone again.
 Open—O little door—Elfreda's here.

[ELFREDA *presses open a board in the wall and, stepping in, closes it behind her ; all is silent in the empty Hall.*

SCENE IV

An ancient house in Cornwall, used by the KING as the Royal Residence during the hunting season

The QUEEN'S Chamber

The same day, at the same hour as last Scene
A large room hung with tapestries ; in one corner, a wide bed curtained with rich hang-

ings ; various tables and seats stand about the room. There is a door to the right, one to the left, and one directly in the centre of the wall. The QUEEN is seated before a low table, filled with the numerous toilet-articles used by a Saxon lady of rank in the ninth century. The QUEEN wears a long, loose robe, and her beautiful hair falls over her shoulders ; NUMANERA is combing it and, drawing it through her fingers, holds it up to the light admiringly.

NUMANERA. Lady, if noble men of Rome were here—

ELSWITHA (*smiling*). And if they were ?

NUMANERA. They would approach the Queen

As men approach Minerva, half in awe
But all in reverent worship at her feet.
The sunshine captive in these curls, my Queen,
This beauty, this Aurora loveliness,

Seem not for mortals, as the men of Rome
Know mortal women in the land of Rome.
'Tis pity that the mighty King has set
So many duties for his candler hours.
He has short time, in his affairs of state,
To play with roses—

ELSWITHA (*coldly*). Have a care—you pull
My tresses; move the comb more gently, girl.

NUMANERA. Pardon, O gracious queen—
short time to chase
This golden sunshine—ay, but kings are
kings!

ELSWITHA (*sharply*). Yea, kings are kings
—and serving-maids are maids,
And not to speak of kings. Now, curl my
hair.

[NUMANERA *drops the comb as if by
accident; stooping to pick it up,
she lets something fall from her
bosom; she starts, assumes great*

confusion, and, with much show of apparent secrecy, hides it again ; her movements attract the QUEEN'S notice, as NUMANERA intends.

ELSWITHA. What ails you, girl ? What is it that you hide

In manifest confusion in your breast ?

NUMANERA (*aside, but loudly enough to be heard*). The Saints in heaven be praised ! She saw it not.

ELSWITHA. Make not a tragedy of comedy ; I care not for your secrets—I but asked For pleasantness.

NUMANERA (*in assumed confusion*). The secret is not mine ; It is—it is—the King's.

ELSWITHA (*holding out her hand*). Give me the thing.

[*With apparent reluctance, NUMANERA hands to the QUEEN a waxen model of an ornament.*

ELSWITHA (*aside*). Alfred ! His name—
his Saint—our flower memorial !

(*Aloud*.) What is this ?—Speak—

NUMANERA (*shrugging her shoulders*). 'Tis
not for serving - maids to speak of
kings.

ELSWITHA (*aside*). I must not strike the
viper till I know.

(*Aloud*.) You've learned your lesson well ;
here is another one—

'Tis not for serving-maids to hesitate ;
Whence came this waxen bauble ? Answer
me !

NUMANERA (*in a voice of terror*). I fear the
dreadful anger of my Queen.

ELSWITHA. Then speak more quickly, that
you see it not.

NUMANERA (*sweetly*). I would not hurt my
royal mistress—nay,

I would defend her from a stinging pain.

ELSWITHA (*aside*). God—how she taunts me !

(*Aloud.*) Listen to me, girl,
I wait to hear the story of this toy,
Where you have found it, wherefore hidden
it—
And I will wait no longer.

NUMANERA (*slowly, but watching the Queen slyly from beneath her lowered eyelashes*).
Lady—I—

I have a brother called Cesario—

ELSWITHA. What's that to me ? Make haste to tell the tale.

NUMANERA. He who makes haste in marshes oft is lost.

ELSWITHA (*aside*). The very demons trick me in this girl !

NUMANERA. My brother is no stranger to the Queen ;
From Rome he came with me—

ELSWITHA. Once have I said I would not
longer wait.

NUMANERA. My brother, who is named
Cesario,

Doth fashion gold like one from Heaven
endowed

With magic. By his handicraft he brings
A lifeless jewel into life. The King
Called for Cesario and gave to him
This fair design which he—the King—had
wrought,

With strict command to copy it with care
In gold and glowing colours, like a rose.

Ah what a skilful artist is the King !
Lady—is it not marvellously wrought ?
Here is the flower—

ELSWITHA (*interrupting*). I hear the story !
—I have seen the thing.

NUMANERA. Twice hath the moon been
rounded since the King

Gave this design unto Cesario.
To-night, he carries, with a conscious pride,
The golden jewel, finished, to the King ;
Lady, it is more beautiful than this
By so much as a flower is lovelier,
When colour quickens it, than in the green.
I begged Cesario to let me gaze
Upon this model for his handicraft—
I would contemplate a great King's design
And think myself at home in doing so ;
In Rome, such bits of beauty are the lot,
The common daily lot, of every eye.
Cesario, as ever, trusted me ;
He handed me this beautiful design ;
Then, as I held it, I was summoned here,
And thrust it in my bosom. There's the tale.

ELSWITHA (*coldly*). 'Twas well you dropped
it. I will keep the wax—

A King's designs are not for casual eyes.
I will return it to my lord the King.

NUMANERA (*apparently much agitated*). My Queen—O nay—Be merciful to me!

The King—Cesario—the jewel—the King—

ELSWITHA. Where are your wits? What doth this mumbling mean?

NUMANERA. The King hath private purpose for the jewel;

He told Cesario—my brother said—

O Lady, he—

ELSWITHA (*sharply*). What said he? Must I shake

The stupid words from out those stuttering lips?

NUMANERA (*insinuatingly*). The King said it was destined for a gift.

ELSWITHA. A gift? So be it—Kings are wont to give.

NUMANERA (*slyly*). My brother said the gift was for a maid,

To whom the King hath granted rich estates—

A Saxon maid—O she is beautiful !
I met her in the woods and talked with her.
Her artless prattle of the King—

ELSWITHA (*in icy tones*). My hair is not yet
braided—you are slow,

And twice the comb was tangled in a curl ;
Your hands are over-rough for royalty.

(*Calling.*) Edmora !—

[*The head of the Queen's household
enters and makes a low reverence.*

Send me a softer-handed maid, and one
With honest Saxon blood within her veins ;
Take hence this alien Roman from my sight—
Put her from out the Castle and the Court.

[*EDMORA and NUMANERA go out
together.*

[*ELSWITHA rises ; she looks at the
model, turning it over and over in
her hand.*

His Saint—his name—his sign—Yea ! It is
true !

Since that strange day—when I beheld those
eyes,

Like summer blue-flowers, turned upon my
lord ;

Since he endowed a neat-herd with estates
Because he had a daughter—all my heart
Has vibrant been to echoes.

Am I mad ?—

No !—It is false—false—false—I never liked
This Roman with unblinking serpent-eyes ;
In steady leash suspicion I will hold,
Lest I should do my lord a wicked wrong.
But—Ah—The torment bites !—Alfred—my
lord—

My husband—O art thou like other men ?
Great God in Heaven—THOU ?

ACT III

SCENE I

*Again the QUEEN'S Chamber. Two hours after
the last Scene*

*Daylight has faded and the room is lighted by
hanging lamps. The door in the centre of
the wall now stands open. A transverse
corridor, dimly lighted, passes the door ; on
the other side of this corridor and directly
opposite the QUEEN'S door, hangs an arras ;
this covers the private door leading to the
apartments of the KING. The QUEEN stands
at the door of her own chamber ; she is
resplendent in beautiful garments. Her hair
is curled, and a wreath of roses is wound
among the curls.*

ELSWITHA. Suspicions are the pest of
petty minds,

And doubts are bats which fly but in the
night

To disappear at sunrise ; mine have flown
In the glad radiance of my risen love.

My Truth-teller ! Did I a moment doubt
The virtuous honour of thy sovereign soul ?
Rather I doubt the Saints in Paradise.

Forgive me, Alfred, if the bat's wing cast
Its ugly darkness o'er my thought of thee !
There is his chamber—there my door to him ;
And this—his door to me. O happy doors
That let in love ! To-night, he hath no time
For dalliance or for amorous delight.

To-morrow morn, the Cornwall Hunt begins ;
Now are there grave affairs of State, he said.
Steward of God, my King may well be called ;
He takes no pleasure till his task is done,
And, ere he rides to-morrow to the Hunt,
He serves the State with all fidelity.

From Winchester the Bishop came, to-day,

With many parchment-weighted monks, to
talk

Of some momentous matter with the King ;
Now to the Monastery they have gone,
And Alfred waits, alone, their quick return.
I will surprise his solitude—I wear
The garments he has often well-approved,
Silk-sewn and rosy-coloured, interwrought
With broideries of gold. My curls are twined
With fragrant roses. I will challenge him
To steel his Spartan heart against my plea
For one dear moment of delightsomeness
In whispered word——

Mother of God ! What is it that I see ?—

*[The arras, covering the door leading to
the KING'S apartment, opens and
ELFREDA comes out ; she does not
see the QUEEN, in the shadow of her
chamber, and stands for a moment
against the arras, which has fallen
behind her ; she looks to the right*

*and to the left as though to be sure
that the corridor is free. The
QUEEN swiftly crosses the corridor,
and lays her hand over ELFREDA'S
mouth.*

ELSWITHA. Hush!—Make no sound or I
will strangle you.

Come farther from the arras.

[*The QUEEN drags ELFREDA into her
own chamber and closes the door.*

Now—speak soft.

What calling had you, Base-born, there,
within

The chamber of the King? I am the Queen,
Confess—or, by the Mass! you shall be
slain

By these two hands that hold you.

ELFREDA. O my Queen!
I pray you, let me go—I meant no harm.

ELSWITHA. Go?—I will let you go when
from my head

I pluck out my two eyes for pastime.

Go ?—

I will let you go when the blue sky is green

And all the earth is azure. Answer me :

Why were you in the chamber of the King ?

ELFREDA. Lady, I sought the King—I
came to him—

I came—God teach me what to say !

ELSWITHA. Silence !

God is no Master to teach lies. You came—

That fact is manifest enough to me—

But wherefore came you ?

ELFREDA. I was sent, Lady.

ELSWITHA. Sent ?—And by whom ?

ELFREDA. By God, I think.

ELSWITHA. Silence !

You white-washed sepulchre ! It is a lie.

If you were sent by God, you would make
haste

To justify your purpose to the Queen.

ELFREDA. O Queen! I may not; it belongs to God,
And to the King.

ELSWITHA. Incarnate lie! You went—
Nay, I'll not sully royal lips to speak
The shame of it.

[*The QUEEN points to the door at the right.*

Look you at yonder door!
It leads into a dungeon.

[*ELFREDA gives a little cry of fear.*

Hush—no sound!
You need not struggle, for my arm is strong.

[*The QUEEN tears off her silken girdle
and binds ELFREDA's mouth.*

ELFREDA does not struggle.

There—I have silenced her! And if, perchance,

Upon her pouting lips, should linger still
Warm kisses, this my girdle wipes them off.

[The QUEEN drags ELFREDA to the door at the right, holding her with one hand, while with the other hand she opens a stout door; a dark passage is seen.

ELSWITHA. Behold that passage ! And beyond, that door !

Within is darkness—cold—and certain death ;
And here, without, is light and living warmth.
If I unbind your mouth will you confess—
Tell me what led you to the Royal Room,
Tell me what passed between you and the King ?

You cannot speak, but I can read your sign ;

You need but move your hand to signify
Your yes to me ; I will unbind your mouth
To hear you ; peradventure, should I find
That you were justified in the event
I will not punish you. I wait the sign.

My God ! She makes no move—she will not
speak—

She is convicted by her sullenness.

Know you what meets the daughter of a churl,
When she presumes defiance to a queen ?

[*The QUEEN turns ELFREDA's face to
the light.*

Once let me look at her—are her eyes blue ?
No, they are grey as any rain-washed stone.
Is her hair “sun-kissed” ?—as he once called
mine ;

No, it is colourless as stupid flax.

[*The QUEEN takes ELFREDA down the
dark passage.*

Great God ! I have her fast—Go in !

SCENE II

*The following day : noon. A forest in Cornwall
A glade : in the background, the open country
with a lovely view of distant hills. A broad*

stream runs from left to right ; large old trees grow upon the banks of the stream and in the foreground. To the left, a path leads to a hunting-hut ; to the right, the edge of a dense wood borders on the foreground ; in the background to the right, the land rises toward the open country. By walking to the edge of the wood and over the rising ground to a knoll may be seen the eastern view, which is hidden from the foreground by the dense wood. The KING'S servants are spreading a repast beneath the trees, by the side of the stream. CORNEWULF, CEDRIC, and others are talking while they await the KING, who has stopped at the hunting-hut.

FIRST COURT. Thank God ! The happy hunting-tide hath come !

I feel my limbs grow lusty, once again,
After the weariness of endless peace ;
No battles make of man a puny thing.

The dreary Court hath been since Atheldun
Duller than any graveyard on wet days.

CORNEWULF. Dull—do you find it dull ?

FIRST COURT. Yawningly dull,
Sir Pick-me-up !—

CORNEWULF. And wherefore is it dull ?

Nothing stands still ;
'Tis movement, motion, new things every-
where.

FIRST COURT. Give me the old things—
they were merrier.

Give me the roistering days of old, when men
Could eat and drink and sing a lusty song.

CORNEWULF. They drink enough to-day,
God wot, and sing

Songs that make blush the angels. Must a man
Eat till his leatherthong has burst to prove
His gaiety—and drink till hiccoughs drown
The minstrel's melody to prove his wit ?
Wit is not wit that wallows in the mire ;

Wit is the brightness of the spirit's play,
With fine discernment making laughter well
Deep in the soul to warm it. Gaiety
Is sunshine's self that sparkles in the heart.

FIRST COURT. (*interrupting*). By Peter's
staff ! You have a lengthy tongue
And wag it like a clapper. Where's the fool ?

[MONFICHET *comes from the hunting-hut*.

MONFICHET. Look in the glass, my lord.

FIRST COURT. I looked this morning and
saw Wisdom's self.

MONFICHET. There is no folly in the whole
wide world

Can equal Folly dressed in Wisdom's garb.

FIRST COURT. Sir Impudence—why call
you me a fool ?

MONFICHET. First, you're a courtier—
then, you are ambitious.

FIRST COURT. I grant the first impeachment,
but the last—

MONFICHET. Finds you in a most narrow
strait 'twixt two.

If you admit it, then it stands a truth ;

If you deny it, straightway it is proved.

SECOND COURT. Come—little crooked man,
make sport for us !

MONFICHET. The other way, my masters,
it is you

Who make the merry sport for Monfichet ;

Things contradict their seeming oftentimes.

You laugh at me because I'm called a fool—
And prove yourselves the fool that I am called.

ALL. Impudence !

MONFICHET. Tell me, my masters, which
do you prefer—

A crooked purse, well filled with honest gold,
Or a straight pig-skin, measured by the rule,
And counterfeit therein ?

SECOND COURT. Good gold, forsooth !
What matter howsoever it be held ?

MONFICHET. You have admitted in the metaphor

That my crooked frame is but of small account.

FIRST COURT. And do you dare to call us counterfeit ?

You little broken-backed deformity !

MONFICHET. I call you naught ; you stand for what you are,

Or what you are not—as the case may be.

FIRST COURT. Your damnèd insolence goes far—too far ;

Sirrah—remember unto whom you speak.

MONFICHET. I speak to dust and ashes—what of that ?

CEDRIC. You speak to lords, to Ealdormen, and Thanes.

MONFICHET. And who am I ?—I am your kinsman, sir.

SECOND COURT. Art thou a bastard ?

MONFICHET. All men are bastards if they
were begot

In loveless wedlock, but my princely claim
Is an eternal claim, for I am son
Of the great King of Heaven ; wherefore I
stand

Your brother.

ALL. Brother ! Hear the fool ! Ha ! Ha !

FIRST COURT. He has turned preacher and
of Sunday smells.

MONFICHET. There's where the fool is wiser
than the wise.

Straight in your bodies, strong in circum-
stance,

You favour devils Monday, Tuesday, yea—
Wednesday and Thursday, Saturday as well,
And crawl to God on Sunday, and, perchance,
Remember Him on Friday. I'm the same
Sundays and every day. If I forget
To say my Pater Nosters at the Mass,

When Sunday comes, yet I remember God
On week-days.

CORNEWULF. If you remember God
How dare you be the sinner that you are ?

MONFICHET. I am an honest sinner, at the
worst.

I hear men wailing, whining at God's feet,
Bemoaning their intolerable sins,
Beseeching mercy for the grievous load,
And ere the echo dies upon the air
They from their Pharisaic knees arise
And, smiling, sin the same sweet sin again.

[Looking around critically.]

I know a man who loudly keeps the Law
And the Commandments with a trumpet
blast,
As he goes in and out his castle gate,
His garments glistening o'er with sprinkled
drops
Of holy water ; but when darkness falls,

He hastens slyly to the postern gate
To meet the devil by appointment there.

FIRST COURT. (*interrupting*). I would the
priest were here to sprinkle us
To save us from the devil of your tongue !

MONFICHET (*laughing maliciously*). Fear
not, my noble lord, I meant not you ;
Where would my manners be ?

FIRST COURT. Here comes the King ! We
must be solemn now.

MONFICHET. How far from comprehending
that great heart !

How blind ye are ! There is no man at
Court

Loves honest laughter better than the King—
Laughter that hath a breath of morning in it ;
Your laughter smacks of smut, my lords.

SECOND COURT. And yours ?

MONFICHET. I am a fool and feel myself
at home

On dung-heaps and upon the mountain-side ;

The King likes best the summit — life is choice.

But yesterday I heard him say these words :

*“ ’Tis therein that you differ from the beast ;
You have within your soul the will to choose.” **

[ALFRED comes from the hut ; he pauses a moment and looks searchingly at the woods to the right ; he glances at the feast spread under the trees and, seeing that the preparations are not completed, he seats himself on a large fallen tree, overgrown with moss. The COURTIERS gather about him.

ALFRED. Here we will sit beside the laughing burn

Beneath the trees to rest awhile. The sun, Still upward climbing, marks not noontide yet.

* King Alfred's own words. See Appendix.

Behold the wondrous scene before us spread !
The distant hills are beautifully blue,
They lie at peace in the autumnal haze ;
The yellowing trees glow golden in the light ;
Who would abide in houses made with hands !
Castles are prisons of necessity,
And walls are barriers unto the soul.
Our Lord is the supremest Architect,
Behold this perfect mansion roofed by heaven,
With living arches that upreach to God !
Sing—Hunters ! Sing the merry hunting-song !
Let the woods ring !

[*The COURTIERS sing, ALFRED joining in the singing of the first verse.*

THE COURTIERS (*singing*).

Ho ! Ho ! Quoth the King,
At the hunting-tide,
Let the wild woods ring
As we ride—ride—ride

Over the moorland, over the lea,
Through Cornwall Forest fast and free !

Blow, Hunter, blow !

To the morning wind.

There are stags in the Forest
Many-tined.

Ho ! Ho ! For the hunt
Of the hart and the hind !

The Court and the King,
At the hunting-tide,
Make the wild woods ring
As they ride—ride—ride.

They ride to East and they ride to West,
Ever the King rides first and best !

Blow, Hunter, blow !

To the morning wind.

The stag in the Forest
Who shall find ?

Ho ! Ho ! 'Tis the King
Has the hart and the hind !

[A man comes hurriedly from the wood and kneels before the KING. He has shifty eyes and a mouth indicating cruelty ; he is GUNERUNG, the Dane. ALFRED does not rise ; he keeps his position of careless ease, but fixes his gaze upon GUNERUNG, watching him closely.

GUNERUNG. Justice—O King !

ALFRED. Speak ! In the name of Justice we would rule.

GUNERUNG. Sir King, there is a patch of wooded land

There, to the eastward. It is mine by right, But a contentious neighbour maketh claim The stream, that cuts our boundaries like a blade,

Is his, the water his, and all the fish— The many fish therein—are his alone.

Now this stream turneth southward with a curve

To cross the boundary upon my side ;
I hold this gives me claim upon the stream,
And, also, upon all that therein is.
If but the King had in his ample mind
The just conditions of the boundary,
He could decide the question and avoid
An endless strife 'twixt neighbours.

Gracious King,
Beyond the line of the concealing wood
The low ground rises ; there, the countryside
May be discerned—my boundary and his—
Sir, deign to go with me and turn your eyes,
You will confer an endless benefit.
I crave kind pardon from thee, mighty King,
That I so far forget the dignity
Encompassing a sovereign, I should dare
Beseech my lord to walk a pace or two
And turn his head for such a lowly one.

ALFRED. Our royal dignity lies not in form,
Nor flatterer's remembrance of a crown ;

Our kingship is not compassed by a rule ;
I am the father of my people, glad
To minister to all—both low and high.

(*Rising.*) You are my subject—I will go with
you.

Lead on.

GUNERUNG (*stepping aside with feigned
humility*). After the King, I follow, sir.

ALFRED (*severely*). Go first — before the
hunter runs the hound !

[*The KING and GUNERUNG walk to the
right.*

A COURTIER (*aside to CORNEWULF*). The
King is over-gracious to the Danes ;
He stoops to humour them.

CORNEWULF (*aside to COURTIER*). He con-
quers them—
He who can conquer best may humour most.

[*The KING and GUNERUNG have now
reached the knoll ; the KING stands
facing GUNERUNG.*

GUNERUNG (*pointing behind the KING*). Sir King, my land lies yonder—to the east.

[*The KING does not turn his head.*

ALFRED (*calmly*). There is a little place beneath the bone

In a man's back that lets the dagger through
To still the heart—and if my heart were stilled
What would it profit you ?

GUNERUNG (*nervously*). My lord—Sir King
—I know not what you mean.

ALFRED (*with majesty, holding out his hand*). Give me the dagger destined for my back !

GUNERUNG (*surprised and confused*). Dagger for thee—O King !

[GUNERUNG looks furtively around,
contemplating flight ; the KING
seizes him.

ALFRED. Let the deep wolf-cave wait on us awhile !

GUNERUNG (*aside*). Is he the King of
Devils, who can see
My mind, with those all-penetrating eyes?

[CORNWULF, *who has seen the KING*
seize GUNERUNG, hastens to the
spot, followed by the others.

ALFRED (*delivering GUNERUNG to the Thanes*).
Within his doublet is a dagger hid
To cut the Cord of England—search him
well!

But see you harm him not—there is a word
That I would say to him.

CORNWULF. Our noble King
Is gifted with a vision from on high.

CEDRIC. He reads men's purposes—fore-
knows their deeds.

ALL. Treason! Treason!

[ALFRED walks back to the fallen tree
and sits while GUNERUNG is
searched.

ALFRED (*aside*). To die in valiant battle for
the right

Is man's best fate, but to be foully stabbed
By an assassin in the back—to die
By treacherous hand, unshrive[n] and uncon-
fessed,

That were a fate to make the staunchest pale.
By grace of God I was forewarned, last night,
Of this conspiracy—yet knew I not
The moment nor the manner of the deed ;
Close in the wolf-cave lurked the wretched
Dane,

With dagger for my back—this much, I knew,
No more.

The while I sang the hunting-song
I felt with prescient prick the dagger point,
Yet must I still sing on and make no sign.
'Tis written in the unwritten Code of Kings
That we must walk unflinchingly the edge
Of perilous danger with a steadfast smile,

Must sing of life whiles men who hold for us
Blood-dripping death are cowering behind.

[*The dagger is found.*

FIRST THANE. The dagger ! Fires of hell !

Our King's life-blood,
Save for this miracle, would stain it now.

SECOND THANE. You devil-born ! But for
the King's command,
You should be ground to dust !

ALFRED (*aside*). Why do men hate us ?—

We but do our part
As each man does the part appointed him.
We did not seek the burden, cannot lay
The burden down, for we were born to it
Who also are but servants of our Lord
The King of kings. Deeper than any deed
The hatred cuts—I will essay to change it.
'Tis better to turn hatred into love
Than seek a vengeance which belongs to God.

[*GUNERUNG is led to ALFRED.*

ALFRED (*looking keenly at GUNERUNG*). Did you not swear allegiance to the King ?

GUNERUNG (*sullenly*). When we were conquered, then I took the oath

As we were forced to take it—by the sword.

ALFRED. False coward, Judas-traitor, sunk so deep

You could resort to this most damnable deed,
To strike a friend when he has turned his back

To do you favour, could reward a gift
With dagger and with death—O craven son
Of noble Guthrum and a valiant race !

[*After a pause, ALFRED continues.*

A pity stirs within me for your soul—
How very desolate that soul must be,
Consumed with fires of hatred and of Hell !
What is your name ? I would remember it
Henceforth in prayer.

GUNERUNG. My name is Gunerung.

ALFRED. The doom of this deed, Gune-rung, is death.

'Twould need no doom to sentence you,
false Dane,

If I but gave you to my followers.

In mercy I will save you from their wrath.

This treacherous act touches alone the King,
And — I forgive you, as the Christ, our
Lord,

Forgave His enemies.

GUNERUNG. Merciful sovereign ! Is your
God like that ?

He were a God to worship if—

ALFRED (*sharply*). No *ifs* ! Attend my
word. There are no *ifs*.

You crawled here to my feet, petitioning
A favour at my hand—you humbly sued
That I should turn my eyes to service you,
Holding the purpose to deal death to me
In very act of service. I am man,

And I, as man, would lash you unto death,
And hang on yonder tree your carrion foul
For kites and vultures. That I do it not
Proves that I am Christ's-man.

GUNERUNG (*aside*). What if his God be very
God indeed !

Odin, the god of vengeance, ne'er forgave.
Almost I am persuaded to believe.

SCENE III

The Royal Residence in Cornwall. KING ALFRED'S Chamber. Late afternoon of the same day

A spacious room, the sunset light coming through narrow windows. The room is hung with rich tapestries. Fur-skins are on the floor ; a large crucifix hangs upon the wall. There are many seats of different kinds ; many tables covered with parchments, rolls, boxes, numberless musical instruments, implements,

and other articles, showing the many-sided interests and activities of the KING. ALFRED has just entered the chamber ; he is still in hunting-dress.

ALFRED. Save for that child, I should be
wandering now

In Death's vast silent meadow with the Shades,
For me, what unimagined mysteries
In that first dawn-break of eternity !
For England's lady, what a piteous plight,
What fall of human tears if they had brought
Only an empty tenement of clay,
When she came forth with glowing lips to
meet
Her lord returning !

Where now tarrieth she ?

'Tis not her wont to leave me welcomeless.
I sent my emissaries with dispatch
To tell the story of to-day's event,
Lest it should meet her inadvertently.

She comes—I know that proudly royal step,
Touching the earth as though with wingèd
feet.

ELSWITHA *enters ; she moves as in a dream ;*
her face is colourless.

Thou art white, Elswitha, as the virgin snow
When first it falls from chambers of the
North.

Belovèd—art thou sick ?—Or weary ?—
Nay.

Am I not slow of wit ! It is thy fear
Of death-fraught danger that o'ershadowed
me,

The picture of my peril ; but that's past ;
Flash forth thy smile and make November,
May.

Put on the wedding raiment of thy soul,
Thou art not widowed ; I am here to kiss
Warm colour to the snow-drift, once again,

To banish from those terror-haunted eyes
The picture of dark traitor-deeds.

[From a box on the table ALFRED takes a beautiful jewel of gold and enamel. It is about two inches long, and resembles the waxen model which NUMANERA had shown to the QUEEN. The jewel is suspended from a long chain of wrought gold.]

Behold !

Here is a jewel that I made for thee—
A guerdon for thy birth-night festival—
I will not keep it for the appointed hour,
But let it serve a cheering purpose now,
As medicine to moody memories
Of the foiled tragedy, the stamped-out plot ;
By thy grace, Lady, I will put it on ;
I will *essay* to clasp it fittingly ;
I am a soldier—and my hands are used
To sword-grip, not to dainty services.

[ALFRED *clasps the chain around*
ELSWITHA'S *neck, then puts one*
arm lightly about her while, with
the other hand, he lifts the jewel
for ELSWITHA to examine.

Is not the jewel fashioned well for one
Unskilled in handicraft ?—Cesario
The Roman wrought the gold and coloured it,
But I first modelled the design in wax ;
It is my work, he did but copy it ;
I made it as a love-gift for my Queen.

ELSWITHA. My lord—

ALFRED. The name of Alfred curves the
circle here—

I would my name might lie upon thy breast—
And here, upon the gold, is graven deep
Our flower of memory to whisper thee
Of unforgotten things ; here—blessing all—
The holy Saint who guards our life and home ;
It is of many meanings eloquent,

As doth befit its destiny for one
Who, in the circle of herself, combines
All that is holiest and loveliest,
Who meets both sides of manhood's requisite.
Thou art the very flower of wifeliood.

ELSWITHA. My lord—

[ELSWITHA has been standing as though turned to stone. ALFRED, standing beside her, and studying the jewel as he speaks, has not seen her face ; she is very pale, and her eyes are as the eyes of one who walks in sleep. Suddenly, ELSWITHA, as though breaking the bondage of a trance, moves away from him.]

ALFRED (*regarding her solicitously*). Paler
than whiteness yet—and tremulous !—
Where is thy fortitude ? Thou need'st not
fear
The old imperilled days will come again ;
There will be no uprising of the Danes.

And have no fear for me—this Gunerung
Is safer living than he would be dead.
I did not tell thee all—the best is this,
I saw the hatred die within his eyes
When I forgave him, saw his enmity
Turn to a look akin to friendliness.
Perchance, he hath been won to Christ ; if
he—

Then others will be won. Thus a dark deed
May serve good purpose in Life's ordering.
Fate granted me the advantage of the hour
In that I was prepared to act. Last night,
Elfreda—that most blessed girl of God—
Came to my chamber, led by Cornewulf.
Once here, she bade him go as princess
might.

I smiled to see the love-proof Cornewulf
Yielding obedience to a little maid.
The sorry tale she told me with swift speech.
In secret hiding in her father's Hall,

She overheard this miserable Dane,
Together with another traitor, plan
The foiled assassination of to-day.
With steady courage, and a larger mind
Than her slight frame betokens, she came
here
To give me warning—a courageous deed !
She well-divined the secret must be kept,
Her task must be accomplished without aid ;
Her loyal little heart dared all ; she came
Alone, through the deep forest in the dark,
And told her story with simplicity.
I then commanded her she speak no word
On pain of my displeasure.

*[As ALFRED speaks, ELSWITHA's face
has grown more horror-stricken ;
wildly, she unclasps the chain and
holds it out to ALFRED.]*

ALFRED. Elswitha—Art thou mad ?

ELSWITHA. I would I were.

ALFRED (*taking the jewel from her hand tenderly*). My poor Elswitha—

ELSWITHA (*with a bitter cry*). I have sinned
—beyond forgiveness !

[ELSWITHA *rushes from the room*.

ALFRED *sinks into a seat, covering his face with his hand*. For a time there is silence in the room, then ALFRED *lifts his head*; his face is changed as if suddenly aged.

ALFRED. My God ! Hath life's unequalled
anguish cast

Its darkest doom upon this house ? Am I
Like Arthur, stricken by the hand I ringed
In holy sacrament of marriage bond ?
Her baleful beauty drew me as the moon
Draws the strong ocean to the change of
tide ;
And if her soul was dearer unto me
Than mine own soul's salvation, God is judge.

Perchance, this doom was foreordained for
that ;

It is my punishment. My human love
Allured with rosy aureole mine eyes
From gazing on the Cross. Yet, man is
man ;

He cannot wear monk's habit on his heart
Nor curb his passion with an hempen cord.
She is mine own !—Mine own !—

Where is the man
Who hath defiled my bed ? Great God in
Heaven !

She has *sinned*? SINNED and “beyond for-
giveness” ?—

Those words can have no meaning save the
one !

My house is desolate—all desolate ;
Nothing is left—I sit amid the ruins,
And dark Despair sits in Elswitha's seat ;
Deep in his cavernous eyes a mocking laugh

Confronts me when I turn to her old place,
From dear familiar habit of the mind ;
I have been robbed of all I valued most,
And in my children I shall daily see
Memorials of that which never was.
I have not even sacred Sorrow's balm ;
If she were dead and I could touch her hand,
Cold but yet pure—that were a benison ;
Then Memory would like a mother come
To assuage the bitter poignancy of pain ;
She hath not left me even memory—
Each kiss burns backward with a stinging
blow,

Each recollected hour becomes a pang.

Where is the man who hath defiled my bed ?

[Rising and drawing his sword.]

My sword in scabbard leaps to feel his blood
Upon its blade, his corpse beneath its point.
Across the world and over farthest seas
I will pursue him—I shall know his face

When once I look upon it—I will stamp
That false adulterous visage in the dust—

[ELSWITHA *enters softly at the right*
and stands by the door.

ELSWITHA. O Alfred—O my lord!—

ALFRED. Elswitha! Thou!—

ELSWITHA. Ere I forever leave the para-
dise

Of thy dear presence, ere the door be closed
For evermore to shut me out from thee
Into the darkness of eternal night,
O let me look once more upon thy face,
And feel thy hands once more upon my brow,
Commending me to mercy and to God!
My sin was great but it was born of love,
My love for thee which led me to my sin.

ALFRED. Unhallowed words! Bring me
no sounding brass;

'Tis blasphemy to vaunt a holy past
In this black shadow of a sin-stained now.

ELSWITHA. My lord, it was that past which
made me sin.

ALFRED. Leave riddles—and speak plainer.
Waste no words.

ELSWITHA. I am a murderer!—

ALFRED (*starting*). Ah! Then—It was
not?—?

ELSWITHA. With wrath I slew in purpose
and desire

That blessed maiden God hath sent to us
As His best gift;—twice hath she saved my
lord,

ALFRED. Elfreda?—Dead?—

ELSWITHA. No! For I rescued her—
By God's grace, there was time. But in my
heart

I slew her, and God saw the deed.

He spread
His wings above her—left alone to die—
That was His mercy—but my sin was sinned.

I locked her in the dungeon ; there she lay
Cold and alone in darkness—that frail flower!
When from your presence in such haste I
sped

It was to her ! I thought it was too late—
But there was still God's merciful Perchance.
I sped as swiftly as the passing wind,
I reached the dungeon and unbarred the
door—

She prostrate lay upon the death-damp stones ;
But—thanks be unto God—she breathed !
She breathed !

And when I lifted her, she opened wide
Her tender eyes, and when she knew my
heart,

She smiled forgiveness, as an angel might.

ALFRED. Wherefore, Elswitha, didst thou
do this thing ?

ELSWITHA. The fiend of jealousy possessed
my soul

And made my spirit stranger to myself.
I heard from Numanera, yesterday,
A wicked lie that flamed my heart and blood.
'Twas not alone her words that maddened
me,
But the unloosèd thoughts that stirred again
From out their covert ; thoughts that chal-
lenged me
When first I saw Elfreda—when I knew
The King had dowered her with royal gifts.
A burning shame o'erwhelms me to confess
So dark a storm-cloud to your soul of light.

ALFRED (*lifting his hand protestingly*). O
hush ! *My soul is dark—*

ELSWITHA. I fought the doubts until sus-
picion died ;
With eager longing to atone for thoughts
You knew not of, I waited at the door
Of mine own chamber, on my way to you,
Communing with you in my sorry heart ;

Then, lo ! Elfreda from your chamber came ;
She stood before the arras, fair and white
As a May lily on a sunny morn ;
Upon her lips a joyous triumph shone
As if to say, in whispers to herself,
“ I have the happiness that I desired.”
The blood within my veins was leaping flame !
Swift as a tigress, hungry for her prey,
I seized the girl and put the questions fast ;
She answered not, or yet, in such a wise
She fed suspicion, even as she spoke ;
Then I knew naught but one blind seething
 wrath ;
The earth—the sky—the very air—became
Hateful to me, and tremulous with red.
With these my hands I could have strangled
 her,
And marred her beauty with these fingers save
For you ; one fear of you welled underneath
The wrath ; I could not kill her openly,

You might surprise me and behold the deed ;
I dragged her to the dungeon, locked her in,
And left her there to die.

The black night passed,
I know not how ; the ghastly awful dawn
Crept through the trees, and passed, I know
not how ;
The blank day rose, and passed, I know not
how ;
They told me of your danger, your escape,
I heard and did not hear. You summoned
me,
I came—or rather say, I moved like one
Who sleeps in moving yet can never sleep.
And then I *knew*—you said those words to
me !

O Sir !—

I may not breathe the air you breathe,
I am not worthy—I must go away
To live a life of penitence and prayer.

ALFRED (*moving toward Elswitha*). Els-witha, God who made the heart of love
Alone can comprehend the heart He made—
He will forgive our sin—

ELSWITHA. *Our sin?*—

ALFRED (*taking her hand, tenderly*). You
need not go, belovèd, far from me
To pray, for I have sinned the sin you sinned,
And I must pray with you the prayer you
pray.

ELSWITHA. My lord—I do not hear your
words aright!—

ALFRED. Elswitha, in the compass of this
hour,

I trod the wine-press—knew Gethsemane.
In all things man is tempted, like to like,
And none need boast or vaunt himself, to-day,
Not knowing the to-morrow nor the heart.
When I forgave the Dane, I called myself
Christ's-man—and even as I spoke, I fell.

The pitiable Gunerung assailed
Naught but my life—so easy to forgive!—
But when the poisoned arrow touched my
soul,
In that black moment, I forgot the Christ;
Love-born, like yours, a murderous anger
flamed;
Had it then found an outlet, it had done
The very deed of murder with a laugh.
*Man's soul is threefold; passion is one part.**
Within my soul blazed passion's scorching
fire,
When, by your words, I thought you false
to me—
I thought you loved me not.

ELSWITHA. I love you not?
O thou who art the very fount and source
Of all my being! Thou who art a man
To dower me with rapturous bliss beyond

* King Alfred's own words. See Appendix.

The bridal dream of women, yet a star—
My Morning Star of the resplendent East,
That leads my wayward soul unto the
Christ—

Do I not love thee? At thy feet I kneel.

[ELSWITHA kneels.

ALFRED (*raising Elswitha*). Not at my
feet, Elswitha, on my breast,
Thy biding-place. And when thou kneel'st
to God,
I will kneel near thee. Lift thy face to
mine
And let me drink renewal from thy lips,
After the parching passion of my thirst.

[ALFRED *embraces Elswitha*; *he then goes to the table and finds the jewel.*

And now, Elswitha, bend thy gracious head,
And let me clasp, once more, around thy
throat

This golden circle ; let me lay, once more,
My love-gift, Alfred-graven, on thy breast.

[*Clasping the chain around ELSWITHA'S neck.*

Receive this jewel that I made for thee,
For thee—my sweetheart, and the mother-
bird

Of my young Edward.

[*Voices are heard singing, without.*

THE VOICES.

Praise we the Lord of Hosts,
He saved our King.

Praise we the Lord of Hosts,

Come, let us sing

Glory to Thee,

Glory to Thee,

O God Most High !

ALFRED. Elswitha, we must yield our
hour's delight ;

Sovereigns are subject to their people's call ;
We are the servants of our destiny ;
We may not close the door to shut in love
Nor be alone with rapture—we belong
To England.

[ALFRED goes to the door and opens it.
Welcome, Sir Bishop ! Greeting, in God's
name !

*The BISHOP, the ABBOT, MONKS, COURTIERS,
and others, enter.*

THE BISHOP. My noble son and my most
excellent lord,
We go to render thanks to God most high
For His great benefits unto this realm,
He, in His mercy, turned aside the hand
That basely struck at our anointed King.
The Lord Omnipotent hath compassed thee
With angels, Alfred, saving thee from death
To serve His holy Church upon the earth ;

Full worthily for her thou hast performed
High service hitherto, my worthy son.

[*As the BISHOP speaks the last words,
ALFRED kneels.*

ALFRED. Most reverend sir, I am a mortal
man ;

I do what I may do but by God's grace.

[*Rising.*

Lead on, Sir Bishop, we will follow you
To render thanks.

[*The BISHOP, MONKS, COURTIERS, et
cetera, go out. In the distance,
voices are heard singing.*

ALFRED. Elswitha ! Come, my Queen,
Now we will kneel together, side by side.

APPENDIX

I (*page 52*)

“BUT I desired instruments and materials to carry out the work I was set to do, which was that I should virtuously and fittingly administer the authority committed unto me.

“Now no man, as thou knowest, can get full play for his natural gifts, nor conduct and administer government, unless he hath fit tools, and the raw material to work upon. By material I mean that which is necessary to the exercise of natural powers; thus a king’s raw material and instruments of rule are a well-peopled land, and he must have men of prayer, men of war, and men of work. As thou knowest, without these tools no king may display his special talent.”

King Alfred’s Version of The Consolations of Boethius. Done into Modern English by Walter John Sedgefield, Litt.D. (page 41).

II (*page 79*)

“ ALL men and all women on earth
Had first their beginning the same,
Into this world of their birth
All of one couple they came :

“ Alike are the great and the small ;
No wonder that this should be thus ;
For God is the Father of all,
The Lord and the Maker of us.

“ Well-born alike are all folk
Whom He hath made under the sky ;
Why then on others a yoke
Now will ye be lifting on high ?

“ And why be so causelessly proud,
As thus ye find none are ill-born ?
Or why, for your rank, from the crowd
Raise yourself up in such scorn ?

“In the mind of a man, not his make,
In the earth-dweller’s heart, not his rank,
Is the nobleness whereof I spake,
The true, and the free, and the frank.”

*Complete Works of King Alfred the Great.
Jubilee Edition* (page 208).

III (*page 141*)

“AND lo! ye have something divine in your souls,
even Reason and Memory, and the discerning Will
to choose.”

*King Alfred’s Version of The Consolations of
Boethius. Done into Modern English by
Walter John Sedgefield, Litt.D.* (page 31).

IV (*page 171*)

“I SAID the soul was threefold because philosophers affirm that it hath three natures. One of these natures is to be subject to desire, the second to be subject to passion, and the third that it is rational. Two of these qualities are possessed by

beasts in the same way as by men, namely, desire and passion; no creature, save man alone, hath reason, and therefore he hath excelled all earthly creatures in forethought and sense. Reason must control both desire and passion, for it is a special virtue of the soul."

King Alfred's Version of The Consolations of Boethius. Done into Modern English by Walter John Sedgefield, Litt.D. (page 90).

